

The Bi-Polar Perspective and the Sri Lankan Crisis

Written by Asoka Bandarage

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ASOKA BANDARAGE, APR 23 2009

The Sri Lankan conflict, like many other political conflicts around the world, is interpreted from a very limited bi-polar perspective as a primordial ethnic conflict between two groups. In the Sri Lankan case, it is seen as a Sinhala versus Tamil conflict: Sinhala majority as oppressor and Tamil minority as victim. Accordingly, it is argued that Sinhala government discrimination against Tamils gave rise to Tamil resistance, separatism and LTTE terrorism. LTTE's record of suicide bombing, forcible child recruitment, assassination of political leaders, killing of journalists and dissidents, narcotics trading and other illegal activities is well known. However, even those governments that have banned the LTTE as one, if not the most sophisticated terrorist organization in the world, still subscribe to the limited interpretation of the Sri Lankan conflict as an ethnic conflict and support ethnically based solutions, be it outright separatism or extensive political devolution in favor of Tamils.

The deeply entrenched dualistic ethnic perspective is clearly evident in the interpretation of the current military confrontation between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Right now, some 70 to 100,000 helpless Tamil civilians are trapped in a less than 20 square mile No Fire Zone in northeastern Sri Lanka. The LTTE is forcibly holding these civilians from leaving the NFZ and even firing at those who are trying to escape to the government held areas. The international community – politicians, media, NGOs – influenced by the Tamil Diaspora is interpreting the situation from the narrow ethnic perspective as a case of Sinhala government 'genocide' against the Tamil minority. The deeply held ethnic analysis is preventing many in the international community from seeing the LTTE's destruction, if not 'genocide' of the Tamil community and the fact that Tamils, like Sinhalese and Muslims are living in relative safety in 98% of the island's territory under government control.

We need to move beyond the narrow bi-polar perspective to develop a broader historically based political-economic analysis. It provides a multi-polar approach taking into account the complex interplay of local, regional and international factors.

The dominant analysis of the Sri Lankan conflict is focused on a limited historical period in the post-independence era, from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s when certain linguistic, educational and employment policies were introduced by the state. The 1956 Act making Sinhala the official language, the language and region based quotas for entry into the prestigious science faculties in the state university are commonly interpreted as instruments of Sinhala discrimination against Tamils.

However, if we widen the historical lens and examine the preceding British colonial period, a different picture emerges. During the British colonial period, Tamils, specifically the Vellala caste from Jaffna, emerged as a privileged elite. They had proportionately greater access to Christian missionary schools, English language education and professional employment in the fields of medicine, the judiciary and the civil service. A small Sinhala elite also had access to privileged employment, but the majority of Sinhalese were marginalized and victimized: Sinhalese Buddhists became 'second class' citizens.

Post-independence policies were a product of universal franchise and electoral democracy in the post-independence era. They were directed against English educated elite of all ethnic groups, Sinhalese, Tamils and Burghers, not just the Vellala elite. Take for instance affirmative action represented by district quotas meant to favor the students from rural so-called backward areas to enter the university science faculties. These helped increase the numbers of

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Muslim, hill country Tamil and Eastern Tamil as well as Sinhala students from the rural areas. In fact, more Sinhala students than Tamil students from urban prestigious schools lost their chances to enter the science faculties due to the district quotas. Yet, the Tamil Vellala elite interpreted these developments as simply state discrimination against Tamils. They did not call for changes in the social system to widen opportunities for all, rather, they wanted to maintain their privileges from the colonial era. Their continuing charges of discrimination against Tamils overlook that the controversial legislation no longer exists. Tamil has been made an official language equal to Sinhala. Tamil does not have official language status in countries where much larger Tamil speaking populations exist. In India where there are some 65-70 million Tamils, Tamil is only a regional language. In Sri Lanka, the language and district based quotas for entry into the university science faculties were done away with just a few years after their introduction.

To understand the emergence of Tamil grievances it is necessary to recognize that under the British, the Tamils were considered a majority community equal to the Sinhalese. Majority was defined politically, not demographically by population size. The British gave the Sri Lankan Tamils equal representation with the Sinhalese in the Legislative Council. This, despite their small numerical size of about 11-12% of the island's population, the Sri Lankan Tamils, i.e. the Vellala elite, developed what came to be known as a 'majority consciousness'.

Democratization of politics and enfranchisement of the Sinhala majority threatened the political and economic privileges of the Tamil elite. Their fear of Sinhala majoritarianism predated the introduction of language and educational policies in the 1950s. The Federal Party was formed in 1949 immediately after independence. In Tamil, it was known as the ITAK, the Tamil state party revealing its separatist vision. What started out as a 'revolt of the privileged' Tamil elite, became a wider movement in the 1970s as it incorporated discontented Tamil youth from underprivileged backgrounds seeking education and employment. Youth disaffection and alienation from the central government were interpreted entirely along ethnic lines justifying the call for Tamil separatism and even terrorism to achieve that goal.

In promoting separatism and terrorism, the bi-polar ethnic interpretation undermines the similarities across ethnic divides as well as sharp divisions within ethnic groups. The Sinhalese and Tamils have a shared ancestry and cultural traditions. The Sinhalese and Tamil masses, especially youth have similar grievances and yearnings for education, white collar employment and social recognition. The Sinhala youth who waged the first armed insurrection in post-independence Sri Lanka, the 1971 JVP insurrection shared many similarities with Tamil youth militants.

In addition to these inter-ethnic commonalities, the model of dualism overlooks significant differences and inequalities within ethnic groups. Some of the founders of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka were caste fanatics dedicated to upholding extreme caste hierarchy. Yet, LTTE cadres have been drawn largely from the most disadvantaged groups, such as the so-called Tamil 'untouchables' or Dalits as well as women. Right now, we see how this inequity is being played out. Poor Tamil civilians on the ground trying to escape the clutches of the LTTE are being forcibly held back. Instead of calling on the LTTE to let the civilians go, the Tamil Diaspora and South Indian Tamil politicians seem to be more interested in protecting the LTTE leadership holding civilians as a human shield. In other words, the intra-ethnic class dimensions of the conflict are overlooked by the narrow ethnically based analysis.

Analyses based on the bi-polar ethnic model leaves out other ethnic groups who have significant stakes in the conflict. In the Sri Lankan case, the Muslim interests have been greatly neglected. Like the Sinhalese, the Muslims were ethnically cleansed from the Northern and Eastern Provinces by the LTTE. Their opposition to the LTTE and Tamil separatism in the North and the East has to be taken into account in policymaking. This neglect of Muslims led to the demand for an autonomous Muslim area in the Eastern Province during the 2002 Norwegian facilitated peace process.

Regional Dimension

The bi-polar model tends to see the Sri Lankan conflict as a domestic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka when it has been a regional South Asian conflict from the beginning. Today, the most vociferous support for Eelam and the LTTE comes from South India. To understand, Tamil Nadu support for Tamil separatism, it is

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necessary to go back in history. The call for a separate Dravidian language speaking Dravidasthan in South India emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in fear of impending Hindi and Northern dominance in India following independence from the British. By the 1960s, this secessionist movement had become the greatest threat to the Indian union. In 1963 a draconian amendment was added to the Indian Constitution outlawing secessionism and in 1965 Hindi was made the national language and languages, such as Tamil the regional languages.

After the search for Dravidasthan and struggle against 'Hindi imperialism' was lost, the search for a separate Tamil state shifted from India to neighboring Sri Lanka, a smaller and weaker state. From the beginning the Eelam movement was nurtured and supported by Tamil Nadu politicians. They pressured the central government and the Congress Party dependent on their coalition political support to intervene on behalf of the Tamil separatist cause in Sri Lanka. Today, some of Tamil Nadu parties and politicians are carrying on a major campaign to stop the Sri Lankan government's military offensive against the Tamil Tigers. By subscribing to narrow ethnic sentiments and refusing to see the intra-ethnic contradiction in not demanding the LTTE to release the civilians, they are siding with the LTTE leadership rather than the civilians essentially being held as hostages.

Global Dimensions

The narrow ethnic perspective is vigorously promulgated in demonstrations by the Tamil Diaspora in capital cities around the world from Washington D.C. to Ottawa to London to Geneva. The Tamil Diaspora has been carrying on a major effort to establish a separate state in Sri Lanka through support of the international community. Currently they are calling for a ceasefire and international intervention, but, not the release of the Tamil civilians. The civilians have become the last weapon in the military confrontation with the Sri Lankan government.

There is a large and influential Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora around the world who constitutes the LTTE's base of financial and ideological support. The World Tamil movement draws from the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora as well as Tamils from India, Malaysia and elsewhere. They point out that there are Tamils in every state of the world, but, there is no state for the Tamils, they are a 'trans state nation'. The desire to establish a Tamil state of Eelam in Sri Lanka rather than India, where most Tamils live, goes back to the India's policy against secessionism.

A number of analysts have documented the operation of the LTTE international network, its vast fund raising and funding activities. They have shown how this network has been able to infiltrate media, academia, NGOs and the policymaking establishments globally and win sympathy by equating its cause with that of the Sri Lankan Tamil population. Currently this network is imploring the international community to intervene in Sri Lanka, stop the ceasefire and meet Tamil demands. In other words, it is pushing the bi-polar ethnic perspective of Sinhala government as oppressor and all Tamils as victims overlooking the LTTE's continued use of civilians as human shields and use of young children to carry arms and build bunds for fortification.

The international community has emerged as the moral authority and final arbiter in conflicts conceived as domestic conflicts. But, closer investigation of alternative situations reveal that the international community is not always an impartial and objective entity. Today, many non-state actors including terrorist organizations are more powerful than some state actors. While the international community, the United Nations and NGOs groups have mechanisms to hold states accountable to international human rights and humanitarian laws, they have little power to make groups such as the LTTE accountable to rules of law and democratic norms.

In this regard, it is useful to consider how the expanding global civil society, the so-called 'third sector', the non-state, non-corporate sector operates. When a group with grievances feel blocked by a state, it is able to create alliances with external actors, NGOs, states and international organizations to bring pressure on the local state to meet its needs. This 'boomerang pattern' has worked well in many cases to bring pressure on authoritarian states to meet their human rights obligations and needs of disadvantaged communities. The third sector, especially NGOs are usually celebrated as the champions of global democracy and rights of the underprivileged.

But, there are contradictions in the operation of this model. New research and evidence show that the groups that are most successful in utilizing international networking are not necessarily those with the most legitimate grievances.

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Works such as *Marketing Rebellion* by Clifford Bob shows that it is the groups that are most savvy and financially powerful, those who have access to the English language, the internet and international contacts that are able to use the transnational alliances to their benefit. Certainly, the LTTE and the Tamil Diaspora has been highly successful in gaining the sympathy of peace groups, liberal human rights groups and well known activists by pushing the narrow ethnic analysis and equating its cause with Tamil freedom despite its horrific record violating Tamil rights. In contrast, successive Sri Lankan governments have failed to counter this propaganda because of ineptitude and inefficiency. The Sri Lankan government is losing the ideological battle while it is winning the military battle. This has tremendous implications for policymaking. Even if the government completely vanquishes the LTTE, the government could be pressured into an unfair and unsustainable political settlement due to the deeply entrenched ethnic analysis. The demand is growing for a maximum devolution of power to the Northern and Eastern Provinces under a Tamil dominated administration.

Policymaking needs to take into account changing and complex demographic and socio-economic realities rather than preconceived bi-polar ethnic models. The Sri Lankan Tamil population has been rapidly dwindling: about one fourth of this community lives outside the country and about 54% on the island live outside the North and the East. The Eastern Province is a multi-ethnic region where the Sinhalese and Muslims together constitute a majority and the Tamils are a minority. While the LTTE tried to create a mono-ethnic Tamil state in the north and the east, Sri Lanka has historically been a multi-ethnic, multi-religious pluralistic society. Colombo, the capital, today has about 40% who are Tamil speakers. The Central Province has districts where the Indian Tamils are pluralities. Sri Lanka has enjoyed historical tradition of mutual co-existence and inter-mixture.

Any political solution to the Sri Lankan conflict must uphold the pluralism of the country and the right of any individual from any ethnic or religious group to live and own property in any part of the country.

Politicians interested in power promote federalism and devolution as a magic solution to the Sri Lankan conflict. The rights and needs of people on the ground, for land, water, resources, education, employment must be the priorities. That is, rehabilitation and development.

Multi-polar analyses call for multi-polar solutions, an integrated approach incorporating changes at all the levels from the individual and local to regional and global. A Bill of Rights for Minority protection, ways to allay Tamil fears and distrust of the government at the local level, greater recognition of Tamil language, culture and the vast achievements of the Tamils at the regional level and greater efforts to work across the ethnic divides by Sinhala and Tamil Diaspora are needed in this long term project. Many Tamil youth may be passionate but misinformed and many Sinhala youth are apathetic and ignorant. The future belongs to the youth and they must be brought together to find peace and sanity for Sri Lanka and the world.

Dr. Asoka Bandarage teaches in the Georgetown Public Policy Institute specializing in comparative politics, South Asia and conflict analysis and resolution. She is author of, "The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka, Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy" (Routledge, 2009). This piece was originally given as a talk at a Forum on Sri Lanka on April 16, 2009 at American University, Washington D.C. Her website is www.bandarage.com