

# Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: The Dilemma of Building a Unitary State\*

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**[Abstract:** The ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka is a well-known issue of the international political arena. Desire to maintain the unitary state structure of the country, while weakening the political solution to the deadly ethnic civil war in Sri Lanka, aggravated the ethnic tensions between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, the dominant majority ethnic group. This paper attempts to look at how the Sinhalese political elites in their quest for a power attempted to consolidate the unitary structure of the island since country's independence in 1948, and it argues that Sinhalese unwillingness to share the power with the Tamils led the Tamils to lose trust in the state and its institutions and thus, gave birth to the violent Tamil political movements including that of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The paper is by exploring the process of the origin (pre-independent era) and consolidation (post-independent era) of the unitary structure, attempting to identify major root causes of the ethnic conflict presently known to us today.]

## *Introduction*

*T*he tsunami that swept the shores of Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004 killed over

30,000 people regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations. This article deals

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with a different conflict – one fashioned by human beings, which has caused the loss of an estimated 70,000 lives. The vast majority of these lives lost have been from the minority Tamil population. The basic argument of this article is that the desire to uphold a unitary state in Sri Lanka established by the British colonial rulers in 1833 has really been the desire to establish Sinhala hegemony over the minorities, particularly the Tamil minority.

The ethnic composition of Sri Lanka is about 74% Sinhalese, most of whom are Buddhists; 18% Tamils, most of whom are Hindu; and is 7% Muslim and follow Islam with the rest belonging to other smaller groups. Policies employed by the politicians of the Sinhalese in the post independence Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon have been largely ethnocentric and favored the Sinhalese. The Tamils believe that policies such as Citizenship Act of 1948 and the Sinhala Only Official Language Act of 1956 formulated by the Sinhala leaders aimed at consolidating the current unitary state structure effectively ignored the needs of their community. Prominent Sri Lankan scholars such as Dharmadasa (1992), Jayewardene and Uyangoda (1986: 1-47), Rajanayagam (1986: 63-85), and Wickeremeratne (1995) record the Tamil frustrations and explain the motives of the Sinhala political class to formulate such ethnocentric policies.

Modernization processes in ethnically divided societies often bring about conflict between the different groups. Politicization of ethnic differences in favor a particular ethnic group could marginalize another, and thus such marginalization can erode the

trust of marginalized in the state and its institutions. In Sri Lanka, since independence, the Sinhalese politicians and leaders formulated the policies to strengthen the unitary state structure, a kind of political symbol of the Sinhalese. Sinhalese considered such policies and actions were formulated to suit their needs. Many Sinhalese, as *Mahavamsa*\* advocates, believe that the entire island is the sacred home of the Sinhalese and Buddhism and thus, oppose power-sharing with the Tamils that fundamentally goes beyond the current form of unitary structure. All this, however, effectively eroded Tamil trust in the fair delivery of state and its institutions. As a result, the conflict gathers momentum in the direction of “independence” or “separation” in some form.

### ***The Origins of the Unitary State Structure***

Three regional sovereignties existed in the country, when the Portuguese, the first of the Western colonialists arrived on the shores of Ceylon in 1505. One of these was the independent Tamil Kingdom located on the northern Jaffna peninsula of the same name. Two were Sinhalese with their capitals at Kotte, and at Kandy in the central hill country. The northern Tamil Kingdom had been in existence since the early thirteenth century (Arasaratnam 1964:10). By the middle of the fourteenth century, according to K.M. De Silva (1981: 85), “the Jaffna Kingdom had effective control over the north-west coast up to Puttalam, over the next two decades, they probed into the Matale district, and naval forces were dispatched to the west coast as far south as Panadura. They seemed poised for the establishment of Tamil supremacy over Sri Lanka.” During this period, more or less three Kingdoms had functioned independently.

However, Jaffna's single sovereign authority came under fire when Parakramabahu VI, the Sinhalese King of what came to be called the Kotte Kingdom, was confronted with a dual threat from what Sinhalese scholars call "adversaries of the Sinhalese" eventually subjugated it (Ibid: 7). By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Jaffna Kingdom was under Sinhalese rule. Parakramabahu VI installed Sapumal Kumaraya, his adopted son, to the throne in Jaffna. As it happened so often in Sinhalese Kingdoms history, dispute over succession followed the death of Parakramabahu VI shattered all his long-term aims. The first benefit went to the northerners. That is to say, Jaffna successfully re-established itself as an independent Kingdom under Pararajasekaram (1479-1519) then developed an own and confident Hindu culture. The history of the sovereignty of Tamil Kingdom ended, when the Portuguese defeated Cankili II, the last Tamil King, in battle and formally annexed the Jaffna Kingdom in 1619. After the Portuguese influence left from the island, the Dutch replaced the Portuguese occupied places until their departure.

Although the Portuguese and Dutch controlled the Jaffna, their primary interest was trade. They only concentrated their resources on maintaining secure control of strategic maritime points on the coastline of Sri Lanka. In another words, they did not introduce any major changes that give way to bring the minority Tamil dominated Jaffna Kingdom under the rest of the control of their region. The task of bringing the island under a single centralized administration was to be left to the British, who displaced the Dutch in the last years of the eighteenth century and ruled the island until their voluntary departure in 1948. In fact, the British had

shared very little concern over the island itself. They appear to have regarded the eastern port of Trincomalee, which is one of the world's finest natural seaports, to be of strategic value for their vast possessions on the mainland. However, with the rapid transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism in Britain during the early nineteenth century, the British decided to establish a direct economic stake in Sri Lanka (Bose 1994: 7). In particular, they now required plantation products in large quantities, both as raw material and as consumer goods. The establishment of the plantation economy (initially in coffee and later, in tea, rubber and coconut) would not be possible without the conquering of the majority the Sinhalese dominated Kandyan Kingdom, which was the only strong local Kingdom resolutely holding out against colonial penetration for the previous three centuries. However, the British, after series of military campaigns against the powerful Kandyans guerilla attacks from 1815 to 1818 finally conquered the Kandyan Kingdom.

In 1831 after the British overcame the Dutch, the Colebrook-Cameron Commission introduced a more liberal form of government than has been operative prior to 1833. Their reform proposed the administrative unification of the entire island. This proposal made for the introduction of a modern administrative system. But the country was made into a highly centralized unitary state. Obviously, Jaffna centered Tamil Kingdom neither consulted by the British nor offered an alternative power-sharing with the Sinhalese. The constitutional reforms or new set of constitutions introduced by the British since 1833 such as the Constitutions of 1924, 1931<sup>†</sup> and 1947<sup>‡</sup> paid no attention to introduce the federal form of state structure,

rather they refined the unitary structure. Thus, it can be argued that this was a principal root cause of the vast political problems in the second half of the twentieth century.

### ***The Consolidation of the Unitary State***

The Sinhalese leaders, who led the island soon after independence, were aware of the Sinhalese desire for the unified country thus, they did not dare to reform the British introduced political system. Instead, they took initial steps to consolidate the unitary state structure. During the first phase of the consolidation of a unitary state structure after independence (1948-1956), Newton Gunasinghe notes (1984: 56), “Sri Lanka was governed by a social stratum representing landed and commercial interests. This elite was economically and socially a product of British colonialism...although competition...and rivalry took place within the ruling elite on the basis of these parochial loyalties, the political pressure from the people kept them sufficiently united.” However, the year of 1956 marked a significant change. The leadership struggles within the United National Party (UNP), which had ruled the country from 1948 to 1956, was a case in point.

Solomon Bandaranaike, a senior UNP politician and Minister of Local Government between 1936 and 1951, was heir apparent to the Prime Minister, the aged Don Stephen Senenayake, the first Prime Minister of independent Sri Lanka (and the chief negotiator for Sri Lanka with the British over the independence issue).

However, his intentions were thwarted when Don Stephen named his son Dudley as his successor in office. This surprising decision encouraged Bandaranaike to quit the UNP and form his own party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1951. In the second general elections of 1952, the SLFP returned to the Parliament with nine seats while the UNP had 54 seats.

The SLFP's defeat in their first elections did not symbolize their failure in politics. Instead, they organized themselves. Most importantly, the SLFP employed pro-Sinhalese policies to politicize the ethnic relations. To make sure its agendas work, the SLFP, correctly found its base among the Sinhalese, which UNP and other left-wing parties had failed to target. Bandaranaike appealed to systematically mobilize a much more heterogeneous bloc than the UNP had ever focused on. The SLFP successfully gathered into its fold Sinhalese urban entrepreneurs, the rural petty-bourgeoisie of the South, the Sinhalese school teachers, village physicians, notaries, village monks (Gunasinghe 1989: 244). These groups were less privileged and had nothing to lose by supporting the SLFP. They also thought that the policies the UNP made were pro-rich and thus they branded them as pro-West. They also felt that the Tamil community had taken an unfair share of power during the British Colonial administration by profiting from the opportunities for an English education which was available to them. It was a crucial time. In this situation, only the language issue was a coherent and easily understandable political slogan. It served as a focal issue which united the Sinhalese community.

In 1955, Sir John Kotelawela paid an official visit to the Tamil predominant northern Districts. He made a public statement that he would enact constitutional provisions for parity of status for the Sinhalese and Tamil languages. Bandaranaike a skilled politician found this (UNP) pronouncement as an easy bait to gather the Sinhalese support to outbid the UNP. Such persons had little hesitation in rejecting Kotelawela's language policy. They were convinced by the Sinhala elites that (Jaffna) Tamils had always occupied the better position in government service because of their English educational background. Consequently, the SLFP stood on the single focus platform, neatly encapsulated in two words - 'Sinhala Only.' Moreover, the SLFP promised to replace English *with Sinhalese in 24 hours*, if they were elected. In contrast, India announced plans to replace English with Hindi within twenty years (Mahmud 1993: 217).

Attacking the neo-colonial system, Bandaranaike alleged that 90% of the government employment went to the privileged English speaking minority which constituted less than 10% of the total population. As Nithiyanandan rightly observed (1987:111), "the conflict that manifested itself in the run-up to the 1956 polls was not so much between ethnic communities (such as Tamils and Sinhalese), as between two classes of society." It must be stated that the westernized, English speaking comprador class, considered over-privileged, was consolidated almost exclusively in Colombo. It contained both Sinhalese and Tamils. Bandaranaike's strategy was therefore to focus on language rather than race. Not English but Sinhalese as the only official language.

The implication of the “Official Language Act” administered by the majority Sinhalese ruling sector was to foster communal politics and to consolidate a unitary structure of government. On the one hand, this situation resulted in dividing the Sinhalese community in terms of those with access to English education (a minority) and those without (a majority, mostly residing in villages). On the other hand, it divided the Sri Lankan Tamils in terms of their language (Tamil) and the only official language that was legislated.

The actual situation on the ground was that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to the services of the American missionary societies in northern Sri Lanka, large numbers of Tamils in Jaffna enjoyed the opportunity of an education in the English medium. These included those of the lower middle class as well. Kearney writes (1967: 137): “The Jaffna Tamils have enjoyed superior educational and occupational opportunities and political as well as business, professional and intellectual leadership ...” When the State called for employment in the public sector, because of their education in the English medium, the Tamils from Jaffna were selected. These included those from the lower middle classes as well. Among the Sinhalese, only those who were from the wealthier classes had the opportunity to receive an education in the English medium. The “*Sinhala only*” policy of the Bandaranaike government, though it was primarily an anti-English issue, developed into an anti-Tamil issue in the minds of the poor Sinhalese. The ethnic group that had access to better employment due to their superior access to an education in the English

medium was the minority Tamils. Consequently, the “*Sinhala only*” policy was opposed by the Tamil politicians of Sri Lanka, especially those belonging to the Federal Party (FP), and the leftists ((Nithiyanandan 1987: 114).

In 1944 as Minister of Local Government – in the UNP government – Bandaranaike had been one of the first politicians to state that he saw no harm in recognizing Tamil also as an official language (Wilson 1988: 40). Why then, did he change course in the 1950s – Sinhala Only and not Both Sinhala and Tamil? First, and perhaps most importantly, by imposing the Sinhala language on the people, whether ethnically Sinhalese or not, the attempt was to establish a unique culture based on a single language, thus strengthening the unitary state in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the Tamil perception was and is that the Sinhala language is instrumentalized to oppress the minorities. Secondly, there was the fact that in the Westminster style legislative and political system inherited from the British, election depends on the number of votes that one can muster. Bandaranaike dreamt of being hailed as a great Sinhalese politician, who spearheaded the cause of the oppressed Sinhalese, who in fact constituted the majority of the electorate.

As far as the minority Tamils were concerned this policy disrupted their everyday life. First, they feared that the Sinhala language only as the official language would cause problems in their carrying out of the functions of their employment and hinder their prospects of promotion to higher office. Secondly, they were

convinced that implementation of the Sinhala Only Act would eventually result in their fundamental rights being curtailed. Thirdly, as Chattopadhaya notes (1994: 52), it sparked the first communal riots between the Sinhalese and Tamils. While the bill was being debated in Parliament, there was serious communal rioting in Colombo and the eastern province. On 5 June, disturbances occurred at Colombo about 200 Tamils led by 12 members of Parliament staged a silent protest demonstration outside the Parliament building. They were assaulted, even stoned, by Sinhalese mobs, hired by the Sinhalese politicians. Rioting then spread throughout the city, many Tamils being assaulted and some shops of both Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils being looted.

In order to placate Tamils, Bandaranaike attempted to reach a compromise with Tamil leaders, who were growing increasingly hostile to the Sinhalese leadership. He took constructive step of signing an agreement with Chelvanayakam, the FP leader on 26 July 1957, known as the Banderanaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (B-C Pact). The pact opened the way for a wide-ranging decentralization of administration and devolution of powers to the Tamil areas of the north and east. It proposed that Tamil Northern Province would constitute a single regional authority, while the predominantly Tamil but demographically more complex Eastern province would be divided into two or more such units. However, all these units would be free to amalgamate, if they so desired. Moreover, it was agreed that Parliament would devolve all powers to the regional bodies on the following subjects - agriculture, cooperatives, lands and land development, colonization,

education, health, industries, fisheries, housing and social services, electricity, irrigation schemes and roads (Wilson 1994: 10-25). Most important of all, the pact stipulated that Tamil should be used as the official language for all administrative work in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Bandaranaike defended the B-C pact in Parliament stating (Ponnambalam 1983: 254-255):

“...we cannot decide these issues on grounds of extremism...naturally, Tamils will have the right to go up to the very summit of education in that medium...the Tamil medium should also be used in examinations...”

The B-C pact represented a wide ranging and comprehensive devolution of power to alleviate ethnic tensions. It also had the seed of a possible federal solution in the long term. When the terms of the pact were made public, there was a storm of protest, mainly from Sinhala extremists of Bandaranaike's own camp and the UNP, who were in the opposition. Significantly, the UNP found an ideal opportunity to gain political mileage from the issue by striving for the popularity they had lost among the Sinhalese (Silva 1981: 514). A senior UNP politician, Junius Richard Jayewardene (who would later be Executive President of Sri Lanka from 1977 and 1988) organized and successfully led a “*peace-march*” to Kandy making his way through the Sinhalese heartland. His intention was to put pressure on Bandaranaike, the Prime Minister, to abrogate the peace pact he had entered into with the FP leader (Kearney 1985: 898-917). In the mean time, a group of *bhikkus*<sup>§</sup> staged a *Satyagraha* \*\* on the lawn of Bandaranaike's private residence in Colombo

to demand immediate abrogation of the pact. Tragically, to assuage the growing opposition to the pact, Bandaranaike abrogated it in April 1958.

The FP, for its part, denounced the surprise abrogation. They organized a series of non-violent anti-government campaigns in the north and east. The FP's non-violent campaign evoked violent reactions from the Sinhalese against the Tamils. In May-June 1958, there were major anti-Tamil riots throughout the island, particularly in the Sinhalese dominated areas of the South. Hundreds of Tamils died and over 12,000 were made homeless (Bose 1994: 62). The point is that Sinhalese politicians opted for retaining the island's unitary state structure and their political powers have lost an excellent opportunity by rejecting Bandaranayke's semi-federal solution. That solution represented an attempt to respond to Tamil grievances that had piled up with the implementation of unitary constitutions since 1833.

There was another attempt to deal with the ethnic problem in 1965. This time the UNP took the initiative, and negotiated the pact based on the previous Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact of 1957. The UNP Prime Minister, Dudley Senanayake and the FP leader Chelvanayakam worked out the pact. The new pact proposed a moderate degree of devolution of power through the mechanism of district councils in the Tamil areas. In the granting of land under colonization schemes, the following priorities were to be observed in the Northern and Eastern provinces: (a) Land in the two provinces to be granted in the first instance to landless persons in the district concerned; (b) Secondly, to Tamil-speaking persons

resident in the Northern and Eastern provinces; and (c) thirdly, to other citizens of Sri Lanka, preference being given to Tamil residents in the rest of the island ((Ponnambalam 1983: 257-258). Regrettably, this pact suffered the same fate as that of 1957. This time the SLFP and left-wing parties were in the opposition. Unable to withstand the pressure, the UNP yielded to the ‘competitive chauvinism’ of Sinhalese. The bill was withdrawn. Donald Horowitz has suggested (1985: 390) the reasons behind the breakdown of the agreement:

“Most important were UNP electoral concerns. Following the 1965 elections, the SLFP had moved back to an anti-Tamil line, portraying the UNP as a party manipulated by the federalists. The district council issue provided a focus for such attacks, spurred by Buddhist monks. Some UNP backbenchers, fearful of the consequences-for the government would have to go to the polls by 1970-were on the verge of revolt. In the end, the UNP leadership withdrew the bill... the party had not yet faced an election with the Federal Party millstone around its neck and did not know how much it weighed.”

Despite the fact that the major Sinhalese parties did not like to seek a solution based on political autonomy or federal formula, the FP, the chief Tamil moderate political party in the mainstream, had continued to be committed to a comprehensive political solution to the ethnic conflict within the frame work of a “united Sri Lanka.” As Wilson notes (1988: 85-86), the FP strongly desired “comprehensive solution without jeopardizing the unity of Sri Lanka.” However, the Sinhalese ignored the willingness of the Tamils to live in the united island. For the (majority) Sinhalese, the constitution that enables the unitary state structure psychologically benefited the Sinhala mentality, which has roots in Mahavamsa, 5<sup>th</sup>

century Sinhalese historical text book. Also, ordinary Sinhalese who hail from villages thought that the unitary constitution would liberate their life out of poverty. For the (minority) Tamils, this situation represented state oppression. On the other hand, the ruling Sinhalese elite attempted resolutely to consolidate a unitary state structure.

For the Muslims, they openly supported the unitary state structure to consolidate their commercial interests. Muslims in Sri Lanka, since independence often cooperate with the Sinhalese leaderships regardless of who occupy the powers in Colombo. The key reason for the Muslims' good relations with the Sinhalese political class apart from the commercial interests is a fear of physical security or protection in the island. Muslim leaders are well aware that their community would face the risk of becoming unfriendly attitudes from the Sinhalese leaders by denying state support for business activities and possibly would face violent opposition as the Tamils met in the early independence period. Such fear and Muslim elite's deep commercial aspirations made the Muslim political establishment dominated by the Southern Muslims to seek accommodative approach and to support the unitary state structure. Muslim decision for the accommodation with the Sinhalese carried two immediate outcomes: (1) Ministerial portfolios and concessions and (2) The revival of Tamil animosity against the Muslims, particularly the north and east Muslims.

The year 1970 was a turning point in regard to attempts at consolidating the unitary structure of the state. That year, the SLFP were returned to power with its traditional allies of the Left comprising the *LSSP* and the *CP*.<sup>††</sup> In 1972, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the SLFP Prime Minister and widow of the late S.W.R.D Bandaranaike promulgated a new ‘Republican Constitution’ (generally referred to as a ‘First Republican Constitution’) replacing the Soulbury Constitution, which had been crafted by the British and had been in operation since 1947. The new constitution was master-minded by Colvin R. De Silva, who was a veteran LSSP socialist. Previously, he had been a vocal champion of Tamil rights. But the Constitution of 1972 which legalized the unitary state structure effectively strengthened the unitary nature of Sri Lanka’s state structure by shelving some basic power-sharing arrangements adopted in the British introduced Soulbury Constitution: Article 29 (2) of Soulbury constitution barred the Ceylon Parliament from enacting discriminatory legislation against a particular ethnic or religious group. The government led by Mrs. Bandaranaike repealed the protection in the 1972 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and included articles entrenching foremost place and state patronage for Buddhism. Moreover, 1972 Constitution re-affirmed the pre-eminence of the Sinhalese language in all aspects of public life. In other words, the new constitution eliminated the entrenched clause protecting the minorities from discrimination, which was incorporated into the Soulbury Constitution of 1947. New constitution did play no role in generating the Tamil trust towards the state and its institutions. Thus, it may

be interpreted it was created by the Sinhala people for the Sinhala people which had effectively marginalized the other communities in the island.

On the other hand, the FP was not successful in persuading the Mrs. Bandaranayke led center-left government to restructure the Sri Lanka's state structure (Oberst 1988: 1-20). Consequently, the First Republican Constitution of 1972, which opened the road to consolidate and enshrined the unitary state structure, came to be described by the Tamil community as a "charter of Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy."

In 1975, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, leader of the FP mirrored the common Tamil mood (Wilson 1988: 88):

"it is regrettable fact that successive Sinhalese Governments have used the power that flows from independence to deny us our fundamental rights and reduce us to the position of a subject people...I wish to announce to my people and to the country that I consider that ...the Tamil Eelam nation should exercise the sovereignty already vested in the Tamil people and become free."

In May 1976, shortly before he died, Chelvanayakam presided over the first convention, held in the town of Pannakam in the northern Jaffna peninsula, of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), an umbrella-grouping consisting of the FP, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) and the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC, an organization representing the plantation Tamils). This convention openly declared that "the restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam based on the right of self-determination inherent in

every nation has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in this country (Wilson 1988: 85-86).” The CWC, however, dissociated itself from this stand. Their decision to withdraw was due to the fact that the vast majority of the constituency of the CWC (the plantation Tamil workers) lived outside the north and east, the territory of the proposed Tamil State.

However, the response of the state and its institution controlled by the Sinhalese community to the Tamil moderates was not positive and the UNP led by J.R. Jayewardene promulgated a new constitution in 1978, which further strengthened the unitary state structure and special place in the constitutional for the Buddhist religion and the Sinhala language (Oberst: 1988: 1-20).

Even at this stage, the moderate Tamil reaction did not support violence or what the government would term terrorism. But Tamil youths could not be contained. Their prospects for higher education and employment were hindered, mainly because of the standardization policy.<sup>‡‡</sup> Increasingly, they lost their patience with the slow process of ‘Parliamentary Democracy’ and the inadequacy of the solutions offered. As anti-government sentiment increased, the concept of peaceful protest or non-violent mobilization against the Sinhala state lost its legitimacy. The Tamil youths lost its trust in the state and its institutions and thus, initiated the violence in the form of organized armed resistance to symbols of state authority in the Jaffna peninsula. In other words, consolidation of the unitary state structure at the expense

of Tamil interests radicalized the section of the Tamil youths and pressured them to adopt some form of violence.

After 1977 ethnic violence against the Tamils in Jaffna,<sup>§§</sup> the Tamil violent movements increased their base among the Tamil youths as the Tamil trust eroded in the impartial delivery of the state and its institutions dominated by the Sinhalese. The Tamil youths thought that they will neither obtain the justice from the political establishments of the Sinhalese nor the Sinhalese leaders would seek a political accommodation beyond the unitary state structure. Such belief among the Tamils, particularly the Tamil youths, gave birth to some violent movement, particularly the LTTE, toward the end of the 1970s (Votta 2004: 15). The notable development in the early phase of the Tamil violent movements was that these Tamil movements, while challenging the Sinhalese dominated security forces in the Tamil dominated north and east, instigated attacks against the Tamil officers and civil servants attached to the government institutions including the security apparatus.

Increasing Tamil violence in the north and east alerted the government led by J.R. Jayewardene. Thus, the government raised military activities against the Tamils, particularly the Tamil violent movements and gained some success. On 23 of July 1983, 13 Sri Lanka soldiers became victims of a landmine when their truck hit a landmine on Palaly road in Thirunelvely. The following day, the security forces reacted swiftly to revenge the killings of their colleagues by killing 41 people in Jaffna. The violence quickly spread to Colombo and other parts of the island in

which “many neighborhoods were destroyed and nearly 100,000 Tamils in Colombo were displaced. Evidence suggested government collusion in the riots (Becker 2006: 6).” An interview of J.R. Jayewardene exposed the state complicity in the violence against the Tamils (Daily Telegraph 1983):

“I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna (Tamil) people now. Now we cannot think of them. Not about their lives or of their opinion about us. The more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here... really, if I starve the Tamils, Sinhala people will be happy...”

The government neither condemned the violence that killed approximately two thousand Tamils, nor took any meaningful measures to punish the perpetrators of the violence. Instead J.R. Jayewardene, then President of Sri Lanka, praised the mobs as heroes of the Sinhalese people (Imtiyaz & Stavis 2007). However, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Premier of India issued the first public statement of concern for the Tamils.

Communal violence in Sri Lanka against the Tamils, according to Kearney (1985: 257-263), “undoubtedly widened the gulf between the communities and heightened the Tamil sense of grievance and victimization.” Also, it left the Tamils out of hope and further isolated the Tamils from the mainstream politics. The political developments since 1983 did not convince Tamils that politicians in the southern Sri Lanka will reform the state structure in Sri Lanka to accommodate the reasonable aspirations of the minorities, particularly the Tamils.

In late 1985, after failure of Indian mediated peace talk between the government and combined Tamil militants and the TULF in Thimbu, Bhutan during the summer of 1985,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Sri Lanka government began to explore some possibilities to share the powers with the Tamils without compromising the foundations of the unitary state structure. Growth of the Tamil violent campaign, primarily led by the LTTE and the pressure of the global community, particularly from India was the key factors behind the government's moves which eventually ended in culminating the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 and the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka in November 1987.<sup>†††</sup>

Although the agreement attempted to devolve some powers to the provincial level; it did not meet the basic formulas of the federal state structure nor took some progressive steps to offer political autonomy beyond the current form of unitary state structure. In other words, the key arrangements in the accord and the Thirteenth Amendment failed to assure political autonomy to the provinces since they confer a large portion of the executive powers to the central government, for example, Indo-Lanka Accord gives authority to the President to appoint a governor for each province for five years. However, the same Accord authorizes the President to sack the governor at any time. It is therefore highly likely the President would remove the governor when the former believes that the action of the latter is not compatible with the interests of the ruling political class controlled by the Sinhalese. Moreover, if the President believes that the provincial councils are not

performing well to meet the needs of the province, “the President can take over the position of the governor and Parliament will act as the provincial council (Oberst 1988).” For this reason, it is safe to point that Indo-Lanka Accord and the Thirteenth Amendment grant excessive powers and authority to the President who acts as the head of the government. Since the governor has the authority to dissolve the provincial council, the President can apply leverage to the governor either to disturb the functions of the provincial council or to dissolve the council and call new elections in order to have new batch of provincial legislators favorable to the President and the governor. Therefore, crisis is likely between the central government and provincial council when either the President, as the head of the government, attempts to impose his preferences on the provincial council through the President appointed governor, or the president disapproves the agendas (or the laws) of the council.

In fact, the Indo-Lanka Accord could have been considered as a genuine power-sharing document on the table had it allowed the provincial councils to operate independently without the interference of the executive President who enjoys the powers to disturb the functions of council through the governor. Thus, its inability to devolve the powers to the councils and excessive powers of the President helped de-legitimized the Accord. However, India applied strong leverage on the Tamil violent movements to accept the accord and “forced the LTTE into an agreement (Oberst 1988).” Since the failure of the Indo-Lanka Accord, Tamils believe that there were no genuine political discussions on power-sharing took place in the

southern Sri Lanka: The talks between the LTTE and the UNP government led by then President Premadasa,<sup>+++</sup> the People Alliance's (PA) peace engagements with the LTTE in 1994,<sup>§§§</sup> Sixth round peace talks between the United National Front (UNF) led by the UNP and the LTTE in 2002 and strong opposition from the Sinhalese hardliners, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the parties that oppose any political engagements with the LTTE, to the majority report of the Expert Panel appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2006<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> to provide advice to the All Party Conference did not convince many Tamils, particularly the Tamil nationalists that the government controlled by the Sinhalese have engineered some sincere efforts to reform the state structure of Sri Lanka.

The narration thus far indicates that successive Sinhalese administrations consolidated and strengthened the unitary structure state in which Sinhalese would be dominant. The political outcome of this course of action was a movement away from moderation towards extremism on the part of the Tamil minority. Initially, the mobilization against the state was staged politically by the moderate Tamil elites, particularly the FP. Later, it entered the violent stage spearheaded by the frustrated Tamil youth, who were victims of the above-mentioned Sinhala ethnocentric policies.

### ***The Tamils Mobilization against the Sinhalese Resistance for the Power-Sharing***

The Tamil mobilization against the State was gradual. But their opposition to what they perceived as being the establishment of a unitary state structure with Sinhalese domination was clear. The first peaceful protests began as the moderate Tamil political parties' reacted when S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike abrogated the pact of 1957. The FP was a leading voice for the Tamils during this period. They staged a series of massive *satyagraha* campaigns in the north and east. However, the government did not relent. As the FP' campaign continued and appeared to be gaining momentum, the government imposed emergency rules. The army was sent in to assist the police in restoring law and order in the Jaffna peninsula in 1961.

The governments left little room for political maneuvering towards introducing a federal form of government, which the Tamils aspired to as an acceptable solution to the conflict. The federal form of government proposed by the moderate Tamil leadership did not intend to jeopardize the country's unitary structure of sovereignty. It was merely an attempt at a shared power structure with reasonable autonomy for them to remedy what they considered the continuous injustice against the Tamils by successive governments. The FP manifesto for the 1970 general elections reiterated this (Wilson 1988:85-86):

“It is our firm conviction that the division of the country in any form would be beneficial neither to the Country, nor to the Tamil-speaking people. Hence, we appeal to the Tamil-speaking people not to lend their support to any political movement that advocates the bifurcation of the country.”

However, the federalist demands underwent several adaptations and changes during the 1970s. But the point is that the successive ruling political class failed to prove its willingness to politically engage with the Tamils who ruin their trust in the delivery of state. In fact, Sinhalese elites and politicians continued to polarize the society with the ethnicization of politics: they introduced the new Constitution in 1972, which Buddhism was given a preeminent place with State patronage in the Constitution, and banned the British made concession to the minorities in the previous constitution. This inflamed anti-Sinhalese sentiment among the Tamils who considered the new constitution framed to legitimize the majority Sinhalese interests, and played key role to convince the Tamils that Tamils would not get justice both from the state and its institutions. All these provisions that followed the enactment of the 1972 Constitution, such as standardization of university entrance and other indirect forms of harassment against the Tamils, led the Tamil moderate movement away from the federal model within the framework of Sri Lanka's unitary structure.

It is important to mention here that the Tamil elite's radical shift in the political agenda of TULF, from federalism to secession can be considered a direct outcome of successive Sinhalese government actions and attitudes toward their fellow Sri Lankans Tamils, who were de facto a minority. In other words, it can be said that what caused the demand for a separate state and secession was a course of action

pursued by several Sinhalese majority governments perceived by Tamils as discriminatory and unjust.

The initial violence erupted when young P. Sivakumaran had attempted to assassinate Somaweera Chandrasiri, the Deputy Minister for Cultural Affairs of Mrs. Bandaranayke led center-left government in September 1970, when he visited Jaffna immediately after the adoption of 1972 Constitution. Sivakumaran who threw bomb at Somaweera Chandrasiri also made another unsuccessful attempt to kill Alfred Duraippah, the Jaffna Mayor, in February 1971. In an attempt to set up low-level militant organization, on June 5, 1974, Sivakumaran, an ardent young Tamil militant nationalist, attempted to rob the bank located in Jaffna's Kopai town. However, the police fouled his attempt. This time Sivakumaran made an attempt on his own life by swallowing cyanide. According to Swamy (1996: 29), Sivakumaran "died almost instantly." A fear that he could have subjected to state torture might have triggered Sivakumran to carry cyanide pill and use it at an appropriate time. Sivakumaran's suicide indeed increased Tamil enthusiasm for violence among the frustrated Tamil youths, while sending a dire warning to the Sinhalese dominated security forces. Thus, he became a legendary hero for Sri Lanka's Tamil suicide mission, which played central role in the formation of Tamil resistance against the security forces.

However, Tamil violent movement earned considerable attention among the Tamils in July 1975 when Mr. A. Duraiappah, the SLFP Tamil organizer for Jaffna,

was assassinated. Mr. A. Duraiappa, according to the University of Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR-Jaffna) (UTHR: 2000), “posed challenges to the nationalists TULF (Federal Party) in the prestigious Jaffna electorates.” This assassination was carried out by a 20 year Tamil youth from the far north of the Jaffna peninsula named Velupillai Prabhakaran. Since then, he has become the supreme commander of the LTTE, the principal Tamil politico-military movement, which has been (since 1987) fighting with two armies (Indian and Sri Lankan). The Tamil violent campaign against the existence of the unitary state structure eventually internationalized the Tamil problem. The Tamil struggle for independence or secession in a separate state of Eelam was internationalized when, in May 1979, the House of Representatives of the State of Massachusetts passed the Eelam Resolution calling for the creation of the Tamil state of Eelam (Ponnambalam: XX).

The organized and violent mobilization of the Tamil youths is the chief factor in the development of the present stage of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The media institutions controlled by the Sinhala elites in Colombo often describe them as terrorist organization. If it is really true that LTTE is a terrorist organization, how come it has survived for two decades If LTTE doesn't have a popular base among the Tamils. It is true that the outfit often use violence to mute the opposition coming from the Tamil polity. What is also true is that competitive Sinhalese chauvinism couple with pure anti-Tamil policies made the LTTE popular among the ordinary Tamils. The key question here is has any Tamil, since 1948

Independence (from D.S.Senanayake onwards), realistically considered a Sinhalese politician as their chief leader? Muslims have provided genuine support to Sinhalese leaders (in UNP and SLFP), but not Tamils. Why? The simple answer is Tamils do not have trust in the delivery of the Sinhalese political establishment.

Such reality aided the Tamil youth armed resistance in the 1970s and 1980s, gathering momentum as the state continued to take repressive action against the Tamils and refused to share state power with the Tamil minority. As trust in the State to provide a solution eroded, hope in the success of the armed struggle and the ability of the Tamil state (Eelam) to provide a just solution with honor increased. However, it is significant to understand why were the Sinhalese unwilling to share power with the Tamils beyond the unitary state structure?

### ***Why they Oppose?***

The answer is most probably that the perception of the Sinhalese elites (both in government and in the opposition) was that power sharing with the Tamils under the federal constitution was the first step in the movement towards a separate state. The interesting fact is that although the Sinhalese are, in fact, the majority of the population on the island, as Sharma correctly observes (1988: 149), they are struggling with minority complex *vis-à-vis* the Tamils. They are overwhelmed by the reality that the Tamils of Sri Lanka together with the Tamil-speaking population of Tamilnadu in South India number more than 55 million. Thus, while in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese outnumber the Tamils by more than three to one; but

they are outnumbered by nearly six to one by the Tamil-speaking people of South Asia.

There are vast differences in terms of historical tradition and geography between the Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tamilnadu. Yet there is a strong link between the two groups because of a common language. Hence, the Sinhalese fear that devolution of power to the minority Tamils through comprehensive autonomy or federation would jeopardize the sovereignty of Sinhalese dominated Sri Lanka.

Such a fear further stabilized when influential sections of the Buddhist monks went against the formation of the federalism. Monks are concerned about rightful heir to the island (*Dhammadipa*) and who should dominate it. They argue that anyone can live in Sri Lanka as long as Sinhala-Buddhists can enjoy cultural, religious, economic, political, and linguistic hegemony (Tessa and De. Silva 1998: 3). Therefore, many Buddhist monks consider federalist solution as a ploy to break the current form of unitary state structure.

Also, the political relationship between the Tamil political class in Sri Lanka and that of Tamilnadu further aggravated the fears of Sinhalese: the moderate Tamil leadership had always maintained links with Tamilnadu. And later, as Austin and Gupta identified (1994: 275), the militant Tamil leadership connected with Tamilnadu Tamils and the Tamilnadu federal government and received overt support in terms of finance and provision of military training. These factors served

to aggravate the fears of Sinhalese. As Wilson states (1974:15), “the ordinary Sinhalese regards the total Tamil population as a threat to the existence of the Sinhalese race especially when viewed in the context of neighboring South India’s Dravidian millions.” In addition, many Sinhalese think that the reform of the state structure to support a power-sharing scheme around ethnic line, in Oberst words (1988:1-20), “would lead to more communalism that will not be beneficial to a persuadably secular state.”

It is true that Sinhala political establishment manipulate Sinhalese fear and symbols as a means to seize a power. For their own political gains, they deliberately kept alive various that target Sinhalese sentiment against their fellow citizens – the Tamils. On the hand, the Tamil leadership (both the moderates and the militants) are not free of blame. The Tamil leaderships did not adequately explain to the ordinary Sinhalese their reasons for seeking a federal solution. The Sinhalese too were also deeply frustrated with the state and they would perhaps have understood as they did understand the message of the Sinhala nationalistic JVP which staged two failed violent rebellion against the State in 1971 and 1987-89, respectively. In addition, Tamil radical mobilization targeted the innocent Sinhalese in their violent campaign. Even though Tamil militants deny involvement with tragic incidents, which caused the loss of numerous Sinhalese lives, the fact is that they did target innocent Sinhalese in their military (bombing and killing) campaigns.

It is true that ordinary Sinhalese were not targeted prior to 1977 by militant Tamil groups. But as the ethnic conflict developed, there were several incidents in the 1980s. In 1985, for example, a major attack was launched on Anuradhapura, in which many Sinhala civilians were killed (Elizabeth and Stirrat 1990: 38). The Sinhalese elites and politicians including Sinhala radical nationalists such as JVP took advantage of this feature of the Tamil militancy, to alienate Sinhalese sentiment in favor of federalism. As a result, Sinhalese sentiment consolidated in favor of a unitary state structure and supported Sinhalese politicians who opposed a power-sharing with the LTTE.

### ***Conclusion***

What this study attempts to argue that the process followed by successive Sri Lankan governments controlled by the Sinhala political class to politicize the country's state structure effectively marginalized the minorities, particularly the Tamils. Regrettably, those moves to build a strong unitary state structure considerably helped weaken the Tamil trust in fair delivery of the state and its institutions and produced separatist violent movements. This could happen in any ethnically divided society, if the elites formulate policies to cater to the majority ethnic group, while marginalizing the minority/minorities. Minorities would seek their own state and institutions if they are geographically cornered. On the other hand, perhaps there could still be hope if a federal formula could be worked out, perhaps granting more autonomy now than the Tamil leadership would have considered acceptable in the early 1970s.

In language of tactical political science, consociational democracy alone could deter Tamils from seeking separate state with its independent state institutions. In other words, power sharing democracy has the potential to maintain the one nation-state, but with several focal points of power. One language-Two nations were the threat that is rearing its head. There can still be One State – but with two or three nations with two national languages, several centers of autonomous power, several leaders, several visions – working as statesmen rather than tribal leaders. This only can be achieved if the Sinhalese elites show sincere willingness to seek a solution beyond the boundary of current unitary structure, which was a primary product of the British colonial rulers. Tamil mobilization for separate state would further strengthen if elites continuously ethnicize the politics with the safeguard of unitary structure for their electoral ambitions. That is to say, the more the Sinhalese elites and political leaders show disinterest in the federal structure as a negotiated political solution, the stronger the Tamil mobilization for the separate state would win legitimacy both among the Tamils and international community.

Notes:

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\* Mahavamsa says that the Sinhalese are the preservers of Buddhism and maintains that the Tamil rulers who ruled the Northern Sri Lanka as invaders and thus, their sole aims were to subjugate the Sinhalese and the island of Sri Lanka, <http://lakdiva.org/mahavamsa/chap025.html>.

† The British Royal commission under the Earl of Donoughmore visited Sri Lanka to ascertain why representative government as chartered by the 1924 constitution had not succeeded and to suggest constitutional changes necessary for the island's eventual self-rule. The Donoughmore Constitution very first time introduced Universal adult franchise and an experimental system of government to be run by executive committees.

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‡ Lord Soulbury is appointed head of a commission charged with the task of examining a new constitutional draft that the Sri Lankan ministers had proposed. The commission made recommendations that lead to a new constitution in 1947 called Soulbury Constitution.

§ Bhikku: Monk or priest, member of the Buddhist order.

\*\* Satyagraha: Non-violent civil disobedience based on the Gandhian model.

†† During the 1940s and 1950s, the major traditional leftist parties opposed the discriminatory legislation. Legislation enacted against the plantation Tamils, and enthusiastically supported 'parity of status' for the Sinhalese and Tamil languages. However, this situation changed from the end-1950s onwards. The Point is the LSSP and CP were electoral oriented parliamentary parties, and their base lay in the Sinhalese areas rather than Tamil areas. By the late 1950s, they were losing cadres and 'voters' because of their progressive stand on the national question. Thus, by the mid 1960's, these left parties have changed their attitudes towards Tamils to win the Southern Sinhalese support

‡‡ In 1972, the Government introduced a system of standardization of science-based courses. The system was devised in such a way that an average Tamil student would have to score higher marks than an average Sinhalese student, who appeared for the same qualifying examination for university admission to courses in medicine and engineering. For details accounts of the standardization policy, see C.R de Silva, "Sinhala-Tamil Relations and Education in Sri Lanka: The First phase, 1971-77," in *Independence to Statehood: Managing Ethnic Conflict in Five African and Asian States*, ed. Robert B. Goldmann and Jayaratnam Wilson (New York: St. Martin's press, 1984), p.125-126.

§§ The violence in 1977 in Jaffna erupted when the Sinhala police men, believed to have been maintained ties to Sri Lanka Freedom Party of Mrs. Bandaranayke, the party that lost elections in 1977 to the UNP, disturbed the Tamil cultural programs organized by the local Tamils. Tamil organizers and activities opposed the police interference. Four Tamils were killed when the police opened fire when violent altercation exploded to the violent confrontation. A wave of rioting followed, spreading quickly to the south. Among 1,500 people arrested were several well known Sinhalese extremists, accused of instigating violence against Tamils.

\*\*\* Two rounds of direct negotiations were held in July-August and on 17th September between the government of Sri Lanka and six Tamil political parties. And six Tamil political parties were the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), the Eelam Research Organization of Students (EROS), the Peoples Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). All Tamil parties worked out four cardinal principles as the basis for the negotiation, which are today known as the "Thimpu principles." The four principles are, (1)The Tamil People are a separate and distinct Nation; (2)There is a traditional homeland of the Tamils; (3) The Tamils have the inalienable right to self-determination; and (4)All those who want to make this island their home must be given all democratic and human rights. The Sri Lankan government's reluctance to compromise the unitary structure and its refusal to recognise the Thimpu principles as the basis for the talk resulted in the abrupt premature termination of the negotiation. No agreement was reached.

††† Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord was signed on [July 29, 1987](#), was signed by Indian Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#) and President [J.R. Jayewardene](#), the Sri Lankan Government made a number of concessions to [Tamil](#) demands, which included devolution of power to the provinces, merger--subject to later referendum--of the Northern and Eastern provinces, and official status for the Tamil language. India agreed to establish order in the North and East with an [Indian Peace Keeping Force](#) (IPKF) and to cease assisting Tamil insurgents. Militant groups except the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), although initially reluctant, agreed to surrender their arms to the IPKF.

††† The UNP government talked with the LTTE in 1989. The both parties opposed the presence of the Indian forces in Sri Lanka for different reasons. Thus, decided to "talk" mainly to discuss the ways to expel the Indian forces and to destabilize the Indian blessed provincial council administration. Also, these talks completely ignored the core issues and the causes that led to the deadly ethnic civil war. However, talks helped the LTTE to obtain arms and ammunition from the Premadasa led government to launch the military campaign against the Indian forces. With the withdrawal of the Indian forces and the collapse of the EPRLF led provincial council, the disagreements and distrust between the LTTE and government damaged the prospect of continuous engagements and thus peace talks collapsed and Eelam war 2 commenced on 11 June, 1990.

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§§§ The four rounds of direct talks between the LTTE and the People Alliance government led by Chandrika Bandaranayke Kumaratunga and exchange of letters, channeled through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staged in 1994-95. However, parties neither discuss the core issues of the conflict nor show willingness to discuss the issues concerning power-sharing. Talks collapsed and Eelam war 3 started in 1995. On 3 August 1995, Sri Lanka President Kumaratunga released a 'Devolution' package. The Tamil opinions maintained that "the 'new' proposals once again, refused to recognize the existence of the Tamil homeland, rejected an asymmetric approach, continued to treat all the provinces in the same way and to insist on a unitary state (<http://www.tamilnation.org/conflictresolution/tamileelam/index.htm#1995%20Devolution%20Package...>). Moreover, the UNP successfully undermined PA's constitutional reform efforts of 1997-2000 with no good reason.

On December 6, 2006, the majority report engineered by 11 out of the 17 members of the Experts Panel proposes devolution to the provincial level and recommend temporary North East merger for a period of ten years, to be followed by a referendum to ensure that it is genuinely the will of the people of the east. While it would not go so far as to explicitly propose a federal solution, the report made it clear that the political solution had to go beyond the confines of the present unitary constitutional framework. But the nationalist outcry against the report has been so strong that the government has publicly dissociated itself from it.

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