

Paper 14

Origin of the National Conflict in Sri Lanka and Sinhalese Ethnic Nationalism

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The purpose of this study is to identify the origin of the national conflict in Sri Lanka. The origin of the national conflict cannot be understood unless the concept of Tamil nation is examined. The concept that the Tamils have always constituted a nation sanctioned by British administrators and travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have confirmed that the Sinhalese people and Tamil people constituted two nations, with each community occupying two separate territories on the island. In particular, Hugh Cleghorn, Colonial Secretary of Ceylon in 1798, even characterized the two nations, in his famous minutes of 1799, as being of ancient origin and differing *entirely in their religion, language and manner* [24]. Denham (1911), who reviewed the 1911 Census of Ceylon, also stated that *in spite of the closest political connection, the two races are as distinct today in Ceylon as the limits of their settlements are clearly defined*. The limits of these Sinhalese and Tamil settlements have even been documented in 19th century maps prepared by British map makers. In particular, Arrowsmith's 1857 map of Ceylon, indicates that Sinhalese areas can be distinguished from Tamil areas by the

language used for place-names, including those designated for natural and man-made features [11]. The boundaries between the two peoples coincide with areas where Sinhalese names, such as *oya*, *wewa*, *gama*, *gamwa*, *wia*, etc. switch to Tamil names, such as *kuḷam*, *āru*, *ūr*, *madu*, *tīvu*, etc. It also appears that the areas occupied by the two peoples were distinct enough to persuade the British colonial government to designate the territory inhabited almost exclusively by Tamils as the Northern and Eastern provinces in 1873. The census of Ceylon conducted in 1881 also indicates that the two Tamil provinces were inhabited almost exclusively by Tamils in the late nineteenth century (Census of Ceylon, 1881). The Sinhalese population constituted only 1.8% of the total population of the two Tamil provinces in 1881; Sinhalese accounted for only 0.51% of the total population of the Northern Province, and 4.2% of the Eastern Province.

14.1 THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT FAILED TO UNITE THE SINHALESE AND TAMIL PEOPLE IN A SINGLE COMMUNITY

Portuguese and Dutch records indicate that the Tamil provinces were governed as separate administrative units, distinct from other areas of the island, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that the colonial powers observed local custom and traditions in governing the Tamil-speaking people. Although the British government was fully aware that the island contained two distinct nations, it was determined to unite them under a unitary form of government [12]. The unitary governmental structure, however, failed to unite the Tamil and Sinhalese peoples into a single nation, because the members of each nation adhered to their respective traditions and customs and made no serious effort to mingle freely with others.

Tamils Invite Christian Missionaries to Establish English Schools. Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils came in direct contact with each other for the first time in the nineteenth century, when the British government began developing the Sinhalese-dominated Wet Zone for commercial purposes. Tamils, faced with the problems of overcrowding, landlessness, and the lack of employment opportunities in their northern water-deficient provinces, competed with Sinhalese for employment in the public service and in the professions. In the course of time, Tamils competed successfully with the Sinhalese, by virtue of their skills and proficiency in the English language. To Tamils, the opportunity to acquire English education, a requirement for employment in the public service, came with the arrival of Christian missionaries to the Island. Unlike Sinhalese-Buddhists, Tamils-Hindus invited

Christian missionaries to convert people, and to establish schools and churches in the Tamil areas, especially in Jaffna. By the late nineteenth century, Sinhalese nationalists, concerned about the dominant role played by Tamils in the British colonial administration, began championing the cause of the Sinhalese masses.

14.2 THE MAKING OF SRI LANKAN TAMIL NATIONALISM: A MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY PHENOMENON

Sinhalese nationalism became a political force in the 1930s, when the British government granted greater representation to Sri Lankans in the State Council. Some prominent members of the Sinhalese educated and upper caste elite began linking the cultural identity of the Sinhalese-Buddhist people with the nation-state of Sri Lanka, in order to seek special recognition for their race, at the expense of the Tamils. They even accused the Tamils of conspiring with the British to monopolize most of the public service jobs, and to obtain political leverage through communal representation in the legislative councils [34].

Pan-Sinhalese Ministry Excludes Tamils From the Cabinet: The first indication that Sinhalese politicians were determined to assert their superior status over the Tamils began with the establishment of the State Council under the Donoughmore Commission in 1931. The State Council, which was elected on a territorial basis, was vested with both legislative and executive powers. When the State Council was convened in 1936, Tamil representatives were, for the first time, excluded from the cabinet. A pan-Sinhalese ministry was formed and the powerful Minister of Agriculture and Lands, Don

Stephen Senanayake, initiated a policy to settle thousands of Sinhalese in Tamil-dominated provinces under government-sponsored colonization schemes. D. S. Senanayake regarded the government-financed colonization schemes as a means of aiding the Sinhalese people to return to the land of their ancestors. The formation of the pan-Sinhalese ministry and the pro-Sinhalese Council, the Sinhala Maha Sabha, outraged Tamil leaders, such as G. G. Ponnampalam, who advocated that one-half of seats in the State Council be reserved for minorities. The 50-50 scheme was rejected and this paved the way for the emergence of the contemporary national conflict.

When Sri Lanka became independent in 1948, Sinhalese leaders used their majority in the newly elected parliament to improve their community's economic and political positions. Tamils of Indian origin became the first target of discrimination, when the Sinhalese-dominated parliament passed laws depriving the Tamils of Indian origin of their voting rights and citizenship, despite the opposition from Sri Lankan Tamil Members of Parliament. Approximately 40% of the Tamil population was disenfranchised by these measures.

Sinhala Only Legislation contributes to the growing rift between the peoples. The Sinhalese majority in the parliament also enacted legislation in 1956 making Sinhala the only official language of the nation [14]. Tamils were suddenly called upon to obtain proficiency in a language that was alien to them in order to secure employment in the public sector, hold on to their jobs in government services, and to receive promotions. Generations of parents in the Tamil areas had communicated with their children in

the Tamil language and Tamil was the only language of instruction in schools for centuries until the island came under British rule. Tamil was also the only language of instruction in elementary schools even during the British period, and English was only used in secondary schools and the universities. There was, therefore, very little social interaction between the Tamil and Sinhalese peoples, except at the level of the English educated elite. In addition to the linguistic factor, underlying group prejudices have kept two peoples apart.¹ Indeed, very little social contact was maintained between the members of the Tamil and Sinhalese peoples, even after the island was brought under a single administration by the British in the nineteenth century. Intergroup marriages have been rare on the island. There was, nevertheless, the opportunity for members of the Tamil and Sinhalese peoples to communicate with each other through the English language during the British period. The two peoples drifted apart when Sinhalese replaced English as the official language. It became impossible for Sinhalese students to communicate with Tamil students, when the government issued a regulation which required that Sinhalese and Tamil students be instructed in their respective languages from kindergarten through university in the 1960s. Following the nationalization of existing schools, a series of regulations were introduced mandating that Tamil parents could only educate their children in Tamil schools.

The enactment of the legislation making Sinhalese the only official language of the nation

¹W. Howard Wiggins [34] p.270. Prof. Wiggins states that by the mid-1950s, *underlying group prejudices accentuated by awakening memories of past conflicts [had] aroused communal consciousness and antagonism between the peoples.*

was a blow to the aspirations of Tamils, who, like the Sinhalese, had been liberated from English rule. Tamils had hoped that independence from foreign rule would liberate them from the need to educate their children in an alien language to seek public service jobs, and would allow them to communicate directly with government officials in their own language. This right was denied to them when provisions were not incorporated in the 1956 *Sinhala Only* language bill for the *reasonable use of Tamil*. This became a great concern to the Tamil people, especially the Tamil youth who were directly affected by the *Sinhala Only* legislation. It is the *Sinhala Only* legislation, and other discriminatory regulations directed against Tamil students seeking admission to universities, that led to the rise of the Tamil militant movements.

Repeated History of Broken Promises.

The strident positions taken by leaders of Sinhalese parties on the language issue prior to the enactment of the Sinhala Only legislation also infuriated Tamil leaders. The third Prime Minister of independent Sri Lanka, Sir John Kotelawala of the United National Party, had assured the Tamil people in 1955, during his visit to Jaffna, the heart of the Tamil homeland, that both Sinhalese and Tamil would be made the official languages of the country, if his party was returned to power in the general elections of 1956. This statement was deliberately twisted by Sinhalese activists to suggest that, if both languages were given equal status, Sinhalese people would be forced to study Tamil. This provided the opportunity for S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, who was championing the Sinhalese-Buddhist cause, to declare that Sinhala would be made the only language of

Sri Lanka, with a provision for the *reasonable use of Tamil*.² This position of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party was challenged by Prime Minister Kotelawala of the United National Party when he also announced, contrary to what he had promised the Tamils earlier, that Sinhalese will made the only official language of the nation. No sooner was this announcement by the United National Party, Mr. Bandaranaike, declared that Sinhala will be made the official language in twenty-four hours if his coalition party won the elections. Prime Minister Bandaranaike proceeded to make Sinhala the only official language after his election in 1956, without making any provisions for even the reasonable use of Tamil. It became obvious to Tamil leaders that Sinhalese officials were willing to make any promises to the Sinhalese electorate that would return them to power and were unconcerned about the adverse impact that any of these decisions might have on Tamils and long term Sinhalese-Tamil relations. Indeed, the leaders of the United National Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party have, since the mid-1950s, manipulated the Tamil-Sinhala issue to gain political advantage for their respective parties.

Peaceful Protests of Tamil Leaders.

S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, the leader of the Federal Party, received the backing of the Tamil people to negotiate agreements with Sinhalese leaders, even though the negotiated proposals fell far short of the original Tamil demands for substantial regional autonomy under a federal sys-

²See [27]. This report states that the provisions for the "reasonable use" of Tamil was deleted from the bill because of pressure from Sinhalese nationalists and Buddhist activists, like L. H. Mettananda, who threatened to fast unto death if these provisions were incorporated in the Sinhala Only legislation.

tem of government. Both Mr. Bandaranaike of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party and Mr. Dudley Senanayake of the United National Party abandoned their promises made to Mr. Chelvanayakam in 1957 and 1968, respectively, to grant minimal regional autonomy to Tamil areas, primarily because of opposition from Sinhalese activists and members of parliament.³ Successive governments, such as that of Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike's government of early the 1970s, not only rejected Tamil demands, but went to the extent of reaffirming Sinhala as the official language, without making any provision for the use of the Tamil language even in Tamil areas. Mr. J. R. Jeyawardene's United National Party amended the constitution to make Tamil the national language of Sri Lanka in the late 1970s, but no serious effort was made by the government to enforce the law. Tamils continued to be required to communicate with the government in the Sinhala language in the 1990s.

Tamil politicians had pinned their hopes, since the mid-1950s, on the effectiveness of nonviolent methods to persuade the government to redress their grievances. To their horror, they have found that peaceful methods have been not only ineffective in swaying the government to solve the Tamil question, but even encouraged the mil-

itary and Sinhalese mobs to terrorize innocent Tamils. Indeed, the rise of Tamil militant movements in the 1970s was provoked by the terror tactics used by both the military and Sinhalese mobs in order to stifle Tamil opposition to the discriminatory policies of the government.

14.3 SINHALESE MOBS TERRORIZE TAMIL CIVILIANS, 1956-1983

Sinhalese Mob Violence of 1956. Tamil opposition to discriminatory laws and regulations took the form of nonviolent disobedience campaigns under the direction of the Federal Party. In most instances, these peaceful demonstrations were broken up by Sinhalese thugs and by the police. Sinhalese activists encouraged mobs to terrorize Tamil civilians, including those who did not participate in the peaceful demonstrations, in order to suppress Tamil dissent. The first of these nonviolent campaigns began on June 5, 1956 when 300 members of the Federal Party staged a demonstration in the vicinity of the Parliament to show their opposition to the tabling of the *Sinhala Only* bill in the legislature. The Tamil community was outraged that not only the demonstrators in Colombo were beaten up, but Tamils living in other parts of the Sinhalese-dominated areas were terrorized by Sinhalese mobs. Almost 150 Tamils lost their lives in the Gal Oya peasant colony, which had been established in the Tamil-dominated Eastern Province in the 1950s. Even more Tamils were driven out of the colony by Sinhalese settlers who had moved into this area subsequent to the establishment of the colony. The 1956 anti-Tamil riots marked the beginning of the period of repeated mob violence, when Sinhalese activists instigated mobs to use intimidation, arson, looting, rape, and mass-murders in order to compel Tamils to accept both the Sinhala Only policy of the

³See [30], pp 270-271. Phadnis indicates that the most influential Buddhist clergy warned Bandaranaike's government that it was committing an act of treachery against the Sinhala-Buddhist nation by implementing the pact since it will give the Tamils the opportunity to establish a separate state. J. R. Jeyawardene, who later became the President of the island, also organized a march from Kandy to Colombo in protest of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957. It was President Jeyawardene's United National Party that accepted Tamil claims that the northeast is the historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking people and that they should be administered by the Northeast Provincial Council under the terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987.

government and the unrestricted colonization of Tamil districts by Sinhalese settlers. With each successive anti-Tamil riot, Tamil youth became convinced that their very survival was contingent upon their ability to secure their traditional homeland for themselves by armed struggle.

Sinhalese Mob Violence of 1958. The Federal Party, disappointed by the refusal of Prime Minister Bandaranaike to implement the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957, called a convention in May 1958, in order to launch a mass disobedience campaign in Vavuniya in the Northern Province. This gathering was opposed by Sinhalese activists and, what began as the stoning of buses and trains carrying delegates to the conference, erupted into anti-Tamil riots and the massacre of Tamils in many areas of the island, especially in Colombo. Some of these killings and burning of Tamil property were instigated by casual workers and squatters, who had settled in colonization schemes located in the vicinity of Tamil districts.⁴ The government did not make any immediate efforts to stop the violence; it waited four days before it proclaimed an emergency and used the armed forces to restore order. By the time normality was established, more than 700 Tamils had lost their lives, and approximately 12,000 Tamil refugees had to be evacuated from Sinhalese areas and shipped to their traditional homeland in the northeast.

Sinhalese Mob Violence of 1977. The anti-Tamil riots of August 1977 flared up when the

⁴See [31]. Vittachi, a Sinhalese journalist, who was the Editor of the *Ceylon Observer*, raised the following question in his concluding remarks at the end of his book: *Have the Sinhalese and Tamils reached the parting of the ways?*

Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), formed by the amalgamation of Tamil parties, won the overwhelming support of the Tamil people of the northeast at the General Elections of 1977, on a mandate to establish a separate Tamil state called Eelam. The concept of a separate Tamil state clashed with the concept of Sinhalese nationalism, which stipulates that only Sinhalese-Buddhists could claim membership in the political nation of Sri Lanka. In that view, no other community can claim the island, or any portion of it, as its traditional homeland. Sinhalese extremists and the Buddhist clergy, infuriated by the strong demand of the Tamil electorate for creation of a separate Tamil state, waited for an opportunity to retaliate violently against Tamils. It was not surprising, therefore, that a false rumor concerning the killing of a Sinhalese policeman by Tamil militants fueled the anti-Tamil riots of 1977. Unruly mobs repeated the carnage of 1958, but with a greater vengeance. More than 300 Tamils were killed and 35,000 Tamils had to seek refuge in refugee camps. Indian Tamils also became the target of Sinhalese mobs. More than 150,000 fled for safety to India, while over 40,000 became destitute internal refugees and subsequently settled along the southern border of the Northern Province. The President's Commission of Inquiry into the incidents concluded that the TULF's anti-Sinhalese propaganda advocating separation was one of the main causes for the anti-Tamils riots. The government refused to accept any responsibility for contributing to or prolonging the riots. Tamils were infuriated with the government's findings. They were also incensed at Sinhalese politicians for not taking swift action to contain the riot, and for making public statements that placed the blame solely on Tamil politicians. The significance of this anti-Tamil riot was that it encouraged Tamil

militants to reject peaceful methods to secure Tamil rights [28]. The LTTE stepped up its program of violence, not against Sinhalese civilians, but against Sinhalese police and army personnel who were stationed in Tamil areas.

Sinhalese Mob Violence of 1983. The anti-Tamil riots of July 1983, which some describe as the "Genocide in Sri Lanka," began when a truck load of 13 Sinhalese army personnel was ambushed by the LTTE on July 23, 1983 in Jaffna. More than 2,000 Tamils, most of whom were longtime residents of Colombo, lost their lives; another 1,000 were killed elsewhere on the island. Ninety-five percent of the property owned by Tamils in the South was destroyed. 75,000 Tamils, almost one-half of those living in Colombo, were made homeless and housed in refugee camps in the city. Many of these were middle-class Colombo Tamils, who had never supported the Tamil militant movements or the concept of Eelam. The violence affected all areas of the country, including the Central Hills country, the home of Indian Tamils, and Vavuniya, Trincomalee, and Amparai, where thousands of Sinhalese had been settled in colonization schemes. In the city of Jaffna, 175 Tamil homes were set ablaze by Sinhalese policemen. Ten Tamils were also killed by the security forces in the town of Trincomalee in the Eastern Province. This anti-Tamil riot approached the definition of a communal holocaust because it was, according to a well-recognized Sinhalese author, well-planned by the Jatika Sevaka Sangamaya, a powerful trade union "which had an effective say in the working of government offices and corporations."⁵ In some instances, se-

curity forces were directing the hysteria-driven mob and no efforts were made by the government to stop the carnage by imposing a curfew or by showing any compassion to the Tamils. These responses from the government once again outraged the Tamil community, and convinced its members, including moderates, that it was no longer possible for them to live peacefully under Sinhalese domination. The LTTE had the backing of the Tamil community to establish a separate state by the mid-1980s; the stage was set for armed confrontation between Tamil militants and government forces, which has continued into the late 1990s.

It is significant that, in the aftermath of the 1983 anti-Tamil riots, thousands of Tamils sought refuge in foreign countries. By 1986, there was an exodus of 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils to South India, and about 40,000 to various countries in Europe. By the beginning of 1990, almost 300,000 Tamils had taken refuge in various countries, including the United States, England, Canada and Australia. The anti-Tamil riots of 1983 drove hundreds of Tamil youth into militant movements and, with the training they had in Tamil Nadu, they were ready to use extreme measures, including guerilla tactics, to confront Sinhalese mobs and security forces. To many of the Tamil militants, all avenues for the peaceful resolution of the conflict had been exhausted and, given the determination of Sinhalese activists and security personnel to rely on violence to suppress Tamil dissent, there was no option but to use armed resistance to con-

lyzes the circumstances leading to the formation of the Jatika Sevaka Sangamaya as a militant organization and how it is being put to political use by Members of Parliament. See also [35] (p 81). Dissanayake commenting on the role of the army in the 1983 riots said "They were of passive deportment and merely looked on nonchalantly."

⁵See [21]. Under the heading of *The Institutionalization of Political Violence* (pp 44-50), Obeyesekere ana-

front the enemy. Until 1983, Tamils were the victims of Sinhalese mob violence in Sinhalese areas. Since 1983, the Sinhalese police and army personnel, who were stationed in large numbers in the northeast to counter Tamil militancy, became the target of the LTTE's armed resistance.

Sinhalese Mobs Massacre Tamil Prison Inmates. Sinhalese mobs also perpetrated violence on Tamil inmates in the prisons. In 1983, at the height of the anti-Tamil riots, Sinhalese prisoners in the Welikada Prison in Colombo massacred 53 three Tamil inmates, who were imprisoned for political reasons under the Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979.⁶ This attack was instigated and backed by prison officials and government security personnel. These officials stood by and watched Sinhalese prisoners gouge out the eyes of Kuttumani, a Tamil militant who had proclaimed in court when he was sentenced that he desired to donate his eyes so that the receiving Tamil might witness the birth of Eelam through his eyes. The Welikada massacre was repeated on December 12, 1997 in Kalutara, when Sinhalese mobs, armed with swords and knives, attacked Tamil political detainees, who had staged a protest fast to demand that they be charged and their cases heard as soon as possible. Three of the detainees were killed; one of them was hacked to death in the presence of an armed sentry.⁷ These incidents left a deep impression on

⁶Karuraratne, the Chief Warden of Welikada Prison, told the Commission of Inquiry into the prison killings that hundreds of Sinhalese prisoners armed with axes, poles, iron rods, and sticks attacked the Tamil prisoners who were housed in a separate wing.

⁷See [26]. See also Tamilnet (<http://www.tamilnet.com>) (December 01, 1997), Three Prisoners killed by Sinhala inmates.

the Tamil psyche.

14.4 BUILDING A SINHALESE ARMY TO ESTABLISH SINHALESE-BUDDHIST HEGEMONY OVER TAMILS AND THEIR HOMELAND

Sinhalese began to dominate the military in the 1960s, as *government-imposed changes in recruitment* to the military and the Sinhala Only legislation had systematically excluded Tamils from the armed services [5, 4]. Tamil youth, infuriated with the overtly discriminatory policies of the government had, by the late 1970s, begun to form underground militant movements in order to confront the armed forces stationed in Tamil areas since the satyagraha of 1961 to suppress the rising tide of militancy. Most of the soldiers who were called upon to accomplish this task had never been to Tamil areas, nor had personal contacts with its inhabitants, nor had the language skills to communicate with the local people. Government soldiers stationed in Tamil areas had to operate in unfamiliar terrain and among people who were unaccustomed to them. It was in this climate of uncertainty that Commander Weerathunga issued a directive to his soldiers in July 1979, proclaiming that *it will be your duty to eliminate in accordance with the laws of the land the menace of terrorism in all its forms from the island, and especially from the Jaffna district*. The soldiers were thus called upon by their Commander to maintain order in the Jaffna district where less than 0.5% of the population of 850,000 was Sinhalese.

Many of the soldiers considered the northern assignment as a means to earn extra pay, but also viewed themselves as loyal members of an occupying army in a foreign land. These soldiers considered this assignment vital for the maintenance of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony over all parts

of the island. These soldiers had been taught in their primary and secondary schools to glorify the concept of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation. Indeed, they were expected to ensure that the model of security dedicated to the hegemony of the majority Buddhist-Sinhala community was strictly adhered to. This security model has not only alienated the "minorities" – particularly the Hindu-Tamils – but also militarized the entire society and its approach to conflict resolution [1].

14.5 TAMILS VOTE OVERWHELMINGLY IN 1977 TO ESTABLISH A SEPARATE TAMIL STATE

The Sinhalese-dominated government made no efforts to redress any of the Tamil grievances. It continued to introduce additional legislation and regulations in the early 1970s: to ensure that the Sinhala Only legislation was strictly enforced, that Sinhalese students were given preference over Tamil students for admission to universities, that Sinhalese applicants be given special preferences for appointments to public and private service jobs, and that promotions of public servants were to be denied to those who failed to become proficient in the Sinhala language. In addition, educational institutions, hospitals and roads in Tamil areas were allowed to deteriorate and the economic development of these areas were willfully neglected. The Government's aggressive policy on peasant colonization also threatened the integrity of the Tamils' traditional homeland [16].

Government policies and regulations, dealing with colonization, university education, and employment, affected the Tamil community adversely. Tamil youth, in particular, became infuriated with the inability of the aging Tamil leaders to resolve the problem, calling upon them to form a single party to contest the general elec-

tions of 1977. Tamil leaders formed the Tamil United Liberation Front and at a convention convened under the chairmanship of S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, passed the Vaddukkoddai Resolution on May 14, 1976. This manifesto gave notice to Sinhalese politicians that Tamils would adopt new strategies to *establish an independent, sovereign, secular, socialistic state of Eelam that includes all geographically contiguous areas that have been the traditional homelands of the Tamil-speaking peoples in this country* [29]. Tamil youth were called upon by Tamil politicians to join the struggle against the Sinhalese. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which contested the general elections of 1977 on a mandate for the establishment of a separate Tamil state, won all the 14 seats in the Northern province, as well as 4 seats where the Tamils were in the majority in the Eastern Province. The remaining 8 seats in the East were won the United National Party: six seats were won by Tamil-speaking Muslims, while two seats were won by Sinhalese candidates from the recently established Seruvila and Amparai electorates. A series of unfortunate events that followed the elections of 1977, including the anti-Tamil riots, the introduction of regulations imposing restrictions on Tamils students seeking admission to universities, and the use of emergency powers to curb youth movements, contributed to the rise of Tamil militant movements.

14.6 THE RISE OF TAMIL MILITANT MOVEMENTS: THE GOVERNMENT IGNORED THE WARNINGS

The origin of the Tamil youth militant movements can be traced to the year 1973, when emergency powers were introduced to arrest and hold in custody more than one hundred young men, all of whom were suspected of being mili-

tants, for staging a black-flag demonstration during the visit of government ministers to Jaffna. The government also used force to break up a public meeting held on the last day of the World Conference on Tamil Language and Culture, which was organized by young people in Jaffna in 1974. The harsh measures adopted by the government to deal with the youth movement compelled young men to organize underground militant movements. The militant movement began to advocate violence after the elections of 1977. Even the new TULF leader, Mr. A. Amirthalingam, began challenging Sinhalese politicians by proclaiming that Tamils were prepared to use any method, including violence, to win their freedom. Sinhalese leaders, for the most part, ignored these threats, knowing that Sri Lankan Tamils had rarely displayed any tendency to resort to violence, even when they were brutalized during peaceful demonstrations and anti-Tamil riots. Sinhalese leaders were, thus, in no hurry to redress Tamil grievances or for the government to discontinue its discriminatory policies against the Tamils. Sinhalese politicians continued to justify Sinhalese colonization of Tamil areas, on grounds that Tamils themselves had been migrating to Sinhalese areas. Tamil migration, however, has been voluntary and personally financed and has not drastically changed the national composition of any Sinhalese districts or created new Tamil electorates in Sinhalese provinces. Sinhalese extremists, enraged over the overwhelming support the TULF received for its mandate to establish a separate Tamil state, were also determined to encourage Sinhalese thugs to brutalize Tamil residents in Sinhalese districts, especially in Colombo. In addition to the anti-Tamils riots in Sinhala areas, Sinhalese police ran amok when they were denied admission to enter a car-

nival in the city of Jaffna as non-paying guests. These horrible incidents, and the reluctance of the President Jayawardena's UNP government to implement some of the concessions that it promised the Tamil people, contributed in the late 1970s to the formation of the most powerful and feared Tamil militant organization: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by its charismatic leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. [20].

In response, the government enacted the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979 and dispatched more government troops, which were almost exclusively staffed by Sinhalese, to Tamil areas, in order to contain the militant movements which targeted security forces, government establishments and informants. Tamil politicians who advocated separation for Tamil areas were subsequently debarred from participating in proceedings in Parliament. In 1981, Sinhalese police and army personnel, aggravated by the activities of the militants, set fire to the Jaffna Library, which was a repository of some of the most valuable manuscripts and books dealing with the history of Sri Lankan Tamils and their achievements, because of a rumor that a Sinhalese policeman had been killed by Tamils. These events gave additional impetus to escalation of the war against the security forces and, on July 23, 1983, the LTTE killed thirteen government soldiers, who were patrolling a street in Jaffna, by a remote device. The incident, which is considered a watershed in the history of Sinhalese-Tamils relations, led to the destructive anti-Tamil riots of 1983 and marked the beginning of the armed phase of the Tamil national struggle. [22].

About the Author See page 159.

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