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Sri Lanka

No future without a political solution

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The civil war which has raged in the north and east of Sri Lanka for more than 30 years now has taken a significant turn since mid January. The government of Mahinda Rajapaksa has launched an offensive with the full military might of the Sri Lankan army seeking to definitively put an end to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). For the first time in thirty years, the LTTE seems on the way to being defeated.

Under the pretext of a "war on terror" the army has without respite bombed the area of a few square kilometres in which the Tigers have sought refuge, together with some tens of thousands of hungry and terrorised civilians. Although the government is preventing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from bringing aid to the civilians trapped in the combat zone and has also excluded journalists, testimonies agree in denouncing a war which pays little attention to international conventions. The army has from the beginning of the operation bombed hospitals, schools and even its own self-proclaimed safety zone. The number of deaths has been more than 6,500 since the beginning of the year and there are at least 15,000 wounded [\[1\]](#). Figures which will unhappily increase since the Rajapaksa government rejects any ceasefire which would allow the organisation of aid to civilians trapped in the combat zone and the tens of thousands of refugees dispatched to camps by the authorities. The refugees are forbidden to move and no contact with the exterior is authorised.

Numerous accounts from civilians escaping from the zone of confrontation give the impression that the Tamil Tigers has for their part prevented civilians from fleeing the combat zones, to use them as human shields and put pressure on the government to obtain a ceasefire.

The origins of the conflict

Sri Lanka offers a striking example of the political, economic and religious problems left by colonisation [\[2\]](#). An examination of the colonial history of Sri Lanka throws light on the current civil war in its ethnic dimension but also in terms of its economic and social roots.

Before the arrival of the first colonists, the island was divided into three distinct kingdoms, a Tamil one in the north and two Sinhalese kingdoms in the south. The Sinhalese, Buddhist by religion, formed and still form the biggest community on the island. At the last census of population in 1981, they represented around 75% of the total population. The Sri Lankan Tamils (18%), who originate from the island are mostly Hindu but around 7% are Sunni Muslims and 3% are Christian. To this Tamil community originally from the island the British added more than a million Tamils, called plantation Tamils, who came from Tamil Nadu (India) to work in the plantations in the centre of the island.

Whereas the Tamil and Sinhalese communities had their own histories, cultures, languages, religions, one of the main political measures taken by the British colonists was to regroup in the same administrative structure kingdoms which until then had developed separately. The conflicts created between the different religions, the Buddhist religion in particular, and the Western culture and the Christian religions imposed by the successive colonial powers have contributed to the creation of the political problems which still face Sri Lanka today.

From the beginning of the 16th century, under the Portuguese, Dutch and then British, the Christian religions – Catholic then Protestant - were introduced. The practitioners benefited from privileged relations with the colonial

regime. Although not representing more than 10% of the population during the British reign and in the first years of independence, Christians made up a significant part of the elite and the rich of the country.

Meanwhile, the practice of the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim religions was restricted and indeed penalised. During British colonisation, under the pressure of Protestant missionaries, the traditional links between the Buddhist religion and the Sinhalese state of the kingdom of Kandy were broken. In reaction, with the aim of protecting and supporting Buddhist values but also the traditional Sinhalese cultures, Buddhist activists carried out regular agitation against the colonial power. Without going back to the previous situation, the latter found it more practical to grant the Buddhist religion advantages, if not a special position.

After independence, the demands did not weaken. The Sinhalese nationalists considered that the Sinhalese population had suffered during colonisation to the benefit of the Christian minority and the Tamils favoured by the British. It is true that after independence, the inequalities between the Tamil community from the north of the island and the Sinhalese community in terms of education, income and jobs were significant. The educational system was more developed in the northern region where the Tamils were in the majority. Their percentage in the universities and the higher professions was much superior to their proportion in society. For example in 1970, 49% of medical students, 48% of engineering students and 40% of science students were Tamil. As “compensation” Sinhalese nationalists demanded a dominant position in post-colonial society.

The parliamentary arithmetic would give them this possibility of dominating the country’s political bodies.

From the first year of independence, the Senanayake government deprived 1 million plantation Tamils of their voting rights and sent them back to India so as to empty a reservoir of votes for the workers’ parties [3]. The conflict got bitterer with the election of Solomon Bandaranāike in 1956 and the arrival in power of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The latter imposed Sinhalese as the sole official language. During the 1970s two new Constitutions would allow the consolidation of power in the hands of the Sinhalese élite.

Rather than putting in place measures of positive discrimination with a view to re-establishing a greater equality between communities, the government imposed discriminatory measures towards minorities. For example in the area of education, the solution adopted by the government in the 1970s was to impose norms of access to the university which were damaging to the Tamil community [4].

Economic development in the island has also been marked by its colonial heritage. During independence on February 4, 1948, Ceylon (the official name of the island until 1972) had a rather prosperous economy compared to most of its neighbours. It rested essentially on a system of big plantations in sectors oriented towards export but strongly dependent on market fluctuations. These plantations were in their majority possessed by Sinhalese proprietors. The island was deprived of industry (outside of the processing of tea, rubber and coconuts for export) and depended on imports, notably of rice, for its food. The country’s infrastructures were well developed and the indicators of human development (death rates, infant mortality, life expectancy, rate of adult literacy) were clearly higher than those of other Asian countries. That made Ceylon a rather promising country in terms of economic development. The Sinhalese elites who would lead the first government of independence in 1948 saw no reason to overthrow this economic structure inherited from the colonial era.

The question of economic development and increased growth took a new dimension in the 1960s. The fall in profitability of the plantations combined with the problem of food self sufficiency led the state to agree priority to the redistribution to the peasants of the unexploited lands that it possessed. This policy of redistribution, begun in the 1930s and pursued after independence, sought to ensure the food security of Sri Lanka. It was reflected by smaller plots to the point that only subsistence agriculture was possible. It did however allow rice imports to be ended and made Sri Lanka independent of imports for its food supply.

Significant structural changes in the plantation system were attempted, in particular during the periods 1956-64 and 1970-77. Meanwhile, the development of industry was encouraged from the 1960s onwards. However, the continual sudden political and economic changes did not favour economic growth.

From independence, the system of social protection had been strongly developed. The increase in the number of young people due to a high birth rate between the 1940s and 1970s was accompanied by an extension of social measures, in particular free education including at university level. In a stagnant economy, the effects of these social policies were unhappily not those expected. The rate of unemployment increased to reach nearly 20% by the late 1990s.

Young graduates were particularly affected. When education was the sole means of social mobility for young people from the lower social layers and in particular the peasantry, young graduates were excluded from work on a massive scale. Sri Lankan youth who benefited from the educational policies were in their majority Sinhalese who believed that they had been marginalised during the colonial period. They entered directly into competition with educated Tamil youth in their search for rare jobs and opportunities. In this economic context it was impossible to satisfy this constantly growing social demand. That led to the emergence of a revolutionary movement of Sinhalese youth in the south, with xenophobic tendencies, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and to the radicalisation of Tamil youth penalised in their access to university. The Sri Lankan government responded with fierce repression.

The emergence of a separatist movement

In the thirty years following independence [5], the government pursued a policy seeking to secure its domination. Ethnic minorities were marginalised politically, economically and culturally. A policy of ethnic colonisation, mainly in the east of the island with a large Tamil Muslim community, was followed with a view to overthrowing the traditional equilibria between the different communities.

By peaceful means and through parliamentary votes the Tamils would demand first equal rights inside a united state and would then launch a campaign for a federal solution.

The response was a strengthening of the central state, military repression and the organisation of pogroms against the Tamil community orchestrated by groups of Sinhalese extremists supported by the government. This situation, coupled with the absence of economic perspectives, led a section of the Tamil youth to build militant groups whose modes of action broke clearly with decades of fruitless negotiations. Armed groups like the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the Eelam Revolutionary Organization (EROS) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were founded during the 1970s. The EPRLF, EROS and PLOTE were organisations of Marxist inspiration. However the LTTE has never really claimed any Communist affiliation. The objectives it set out have always been the struggle for the independence of Tamil Eelam and the recognition of a separate Tamil state. Their goal is the completion of their national liberation struggle. According to LTTE head Velupillai Prabhakaran, the objective is to establish "a society that is economically self-sufficient and self-reliant. I also want a democratic system in which the people have the right to rule themselves. And there should be economic equality among the working people." [6] .

Beyond ideological references these groups were characterised by a tactic of guerrilla warfare with regard to the government. As the LTTE themselves write "the Tamil National Army also known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were formed after the failure of many years of peaceful demonstration by Tamil leaders in order to win their freedom from the successive Sinhala majority governments, which showed no concern for the Tamil grievances.

Under the leadership of Mr. Velupillai Pirabakaran, the LTTE was founded on May 5, 1976 to achieve what had become unachievable by peaceful methods in over 28 years [7].

The militarisation of the conflict was accompanied by a radicalisation of political positions. The absence of will on the part of the government to construct a multi-ethnic society respecting the rights of its minorities led to the demand for a separate Tamil Eelam (land of the Tamils) among the educated Tamil youths of the Jaffna region.

These groups did not enjoy any great support until the massacre of July 1983. In response to an ambush by the LTTE against the army in which 13 soldiers were killed, the government organised a veritable pogrom against the Tamil community in Colombo. In some ten days, several thousand Tamils were killed, houses burnt, lands confiscated. Violence against the Tamil community took on a previously unequalled dimension. That led to a wave of immigration to the north of the country and abroad and the mass adhesion of Tamil youth to the different militant groups formed in the 1970s [8]. Nearly 100,000 Tamils would emigrate, then constituting the most ardent defenders of Tamil separatism.

The LTTE, rather war than negotiation

During the 1980s, the Indian government organised mediation between the armed groups (which it had trained and seemingly armed) and the government of Sri Lanka. The different Tamil groups would end by agreeing on the following principles: recognition of the Tamil people as a separate nation with the right to self-determination, a guarantee of the territorial integrity of an independent Tamil territory, safeguarding of the basic rights of Tamils outside of their independent territory. In May 1987, the government and the Tamil parties reached agreement on a series of proposals according a special status to the provinces with a Tamil majority in the North and East. The fusion of the provinces of the North and East remained temporary and was conditioned on the ratification by referendum of the agreement in the Eastern province. The LTTE opposed the referendum and disarmament and broke unity. Hostilities recommenced.

Meanwhile throughout the decade the Tigers organised the assassination of the main leaders of the other armed organisations. Numerous moderate Tamil activists were also killed. At the end of the decade, most of the "competitor" organisations had disappeared or had been absorbed by the LTTE, the militants had fled, been killed or resigned. That allowed the LTTE to claim to be "the sole organisation representative of the Tamil people".

In the 1990s, the LTTE increasingly had recourse to suicide attacks. Nearly 200 attacks were directed against civilians and political personalities including the assassination of two heads of state (the president of Sri Lanka, Premadasa in 1993 and former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991). The LTTE did not limit their attacks to personalities: airports, religious temples, offices were also targeted. The Tigers "refined" their modes of attack: they innovated by using the first "human bombs" and in particular women in suicide attacks. From 1989, the LTTE launched their national "heroes" day on November 27, in commemoration of the first suicide attack, which they marked as "the day the first LTTE fighter gave his life for the freedom of the Tamil Eelam nation." [9].

In the name of their struggle for a Tamil Eelam, the LTTE massively used violence against all the communities living in the region that it considered theirs. They did not hesitate to organise massacres of Sinhalese civilians with the goal of provoking in return state violence against the Tamils so as to mobilise people around their ranks.

Violence was also directed against Tamils. The latter do not constitute a united community and had historically divergent interests. The plantation Tamils, who live in the centre and south, have until now never supported the separatist movement supported by the Tamils of Jaffna. In the East, the Tamil speaking Muslims formed a significant

community. In the 1980s, they had founded their own political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMS). The LTTE were hostile to this party which challenged their claim to represent "all" the Tamil community of the North and East. Between 1984 and 1990, the Muslim population which lived in the north controlled by the LTTE were victims of much violence [10]. The situation reached its paroxysm with the ethnic cleaning organised by the Tigers in October 1990. 75,000 Muslims were expelled from the peninsula of Jaffna, with 48 hours to leave. Most of those expelled continue today to live in emergency camps in the district of Puttalam (in the west of the island) [11].

Starting from 1995, after a new round of aborted negotiations, the government opted for a military solution. A more conventional war was waged. The Tigers, financed by the diaspora, were equipped with modern means of communication, a flotilla of rapid vessels, private aircraft equipped with bombs. Families are supposed to supply at least one child to the "liberation army", while the LTTE does not hesitate to recruit child soldiers. Several years of war allowed neither the army nor the LTTE to mark a decisive victory.

Under pressure, the LTTE and government accepted a new cease fire in February 2002 and the opening of negotiations starting from September. For the first time in their history the LTTE agreed to explore a political solution of the federal type inside a united Sri Lankan state. However, in 2003, the Tigers again quit the negotiations table in disagreement with the government on the provisional administrative structure for the development of the North East. During the presidential campaign of 2005 which followed, they would force the Tamil community to boycott provoking the election of the current president Mahinda Rajapaksa.

This warlike logic has led to numerous losses both in terms of lives and at the economic level. But above all it has left little place to political solutions, war became the brutal expression of Tamil and Sinhalese nationalisms.

The study of events reveals the lack of will the LTTE had to negotiate a real peace agreement. The Tigers have never authorised independent political activities inside the Tamil community under their control. A mass movement in favour of peace was an obstacle to their hegemony and was never tolerated. Their political survival rested on the perpetuation of the war, only the perspective of a separate Tamil state was envisaged. Periods of ceasefire and negotiations were used for tactical ends, allowing them to rearm in view of new hostilities.

A government in the service of Sinhalese extremists

This policy has finally driven the LTTE into the wall and with them the Tamil community and Sri Lankan society as a whole.

The new president was supported by the Sinhalese extremists. The government's rhetoric left no doubt about their influence in the president's entourage. Thus the army commander Sarath Fonseka says "I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese; but there're minority communities and we treat them like our people....They can live in this country with us, but they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things." Defence minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa, brother of the president, has said that "In any democratic country the majority should rule the country. This country will be ruled by the Sinhalese community which is the majority representing 74% of the population." [12].

After the split by Karuna, the commander of LTTE forces in the East of the island and his surrender, the extremists pushed the government towards a military solution. In 2006, although claiming to want a political agreement, the government set about dismantling the consensus established in the 1980s and asked the supreme court to annul the fusion between the Northern and Eastern provinces. Meanwhile, it began a "war on terror" seeking to put an end to

the LTTE. The army bombarded intensely in the Muttur region in the east of the island and organised massive displacements of the Tamil population that it forced into camps. Then houses in the Sampoor zone, culturally Tamil, were destroyed so as to make room for the construction by the Indians of a thermal power station [13].

Since the resumption of hostilities, the Sri Lankan army has committed innumerable war crimes against the Tamil civilians, bombarding indiscriminately schools, mosques, temples, hospitals in which the civilians sought refuge.

This “war on terror” has also served as a pretext for the government to attack democratic liberties throughout the country. The government has been guilty of numerous extra-judicial killings, disappearances, arbitrary detentions, launching death squads against Sinhalese who had denouncing the government’s policies. The media have been taken as a target, with journalists harassed, threatened and assassinated, newspaper offices burned and bombarded [14]. Sri Lanka shows once more that attacks against minorities end with the restriction of liberties for all.

The military defeat will not bring lasting peace

The very probable military crushing of the last Tigers in the strip of 10 km² where they have fallen back will not resolve a political conflict which is more than 60 years old. No lasting peace will be possible without the recognition of the right to self-determination of the Tamil people. Without prejudging the result of a self-determination vote on the question of independence, autonomy should in any event be granted to regions with a non-Sinhalese majority, the sole guarantee of peace and democracy in a multiracial and multi-cultural state. Equality between citizens, whatever their origin, should be guaranteed.

Immediately, we should support all initiatives seeking to impose on the government a ceasefire which would help stop the massacres of civilians and the massive destruction. At the same time, the LTTE should agree to let civilians who wish to do so leave the combat zone. The Tamils trapped in the combat zone like those in the government detention camps need food, health care and medicine.

The UN and the whole of the international community, in particular the EU, should clearly make known to the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE that they will be held responsible for the crimes against humanity that they are committing against the civilian population.

Written May 17th, before final victory was declared by the government forces.

[1] Source ONU

[2] See: Grappling with the Past, Coping with the Present, Thinking of the future: Culture, Tradition and Modernisation in Sri Lanka. K. M. De Silva. South Asian Survey 2001

[3] Kadirgama Ahilan, Pirani Cenan. The Tragedy of Politics in Sri Lanka at <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php ?article13514>

[4] In 1971, a quota system based on language was established, replaced in 1974 by a quota system by districts, the latter divided into two categories determining a different treatment in terms of university access

No future without a political solution

- [5] For more on the 1983-2002 period see: Eric Meyer. Quel avenir pour le Sri Lanka? Lettre du Réseau Asie. May 2009. <http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgi-bin/prog/index.cgi> or Rainford, Charan. "Tamil nationalist struggle for Eelam." The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest. Ness, Immanuel (Ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2009
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- [12] from Vasantha Raja : Is this the End of the Tamil Struggle ? May 7, 2009. <http://lankaeye.xuan.co.uk/>
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- [14] Death of a Journalist. January 13, 2009, Asia Sentinel, http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1664&Itemid=183