ETHNO-POLITICAL CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract: This study examines ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The major thesis is that politicization of ethnic distinctions by major political parties has fuelled an ethnic violence and conflict in Sri Lanka. The study employs an interactive approach to understand violence of both parties. Each party's violence against the other increases the sense of distrust between them. Political elites then use ethnic emotions in their quest for power, reinforcing ethnic tensions. This paper also discusses some fundamental historical factors that play a role in understanding Sri Lanka's ethnic violence. It finally suggests solutions to the protracted ethno-political conflict -- partition or power-sharing.

Key Words: democracy, violence, ethnic outbidding, and consociational solutions.

The Journal of Third World Studies, Vol 25, No 2, Fall 2008.

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"Why?" That was the key question shared by many Western observers when they were astonished by the wave of Tamil Tiger suicide bombing in the 1980's and 1990's that ripped through Sri Lanka, a state of approximately 20 million people that previously considered a model of democracy in Asia. Why have young Tamils, a minority group comprising roughly 18 percent of Sri Lankans in a majority Sinhala society, lost trust in the state and its institutions? What has made young Tamils, both men and women, willingly turn themselves into suicide bombers? A simple answer blames the ethnic conflict or civil war which has killed over 70,000 people, mostly minority Tamils, displaced hundreds of thousands more internally, and forced nearly a million Tamils to flee the country.

As Ted Robert Gurr has observed, there is no comprehensive and widely accepted theory of the causes and consequences of ethno-political conflict.[1] Instead, there are many factors that can lead to tensions between groups of people. This paper will first review many of these factors, and then focus on how the politicization of ethnic tensions has triggered violence and tragedy in Sri Lanka.

Analytical Frameworks

The **primordialist approach** offers one simple yet powerful explanation about ethno-political conflict. For primordialists, ethnic identity is inborn and therefore immutable,[2] as both culturally acquired aspects (language, culture, and religion) and genetically determined characteristics (pigmentation and physiognomy) in shaping ethnic identity.[3] Primordialism's socio-biological strand claims that ethnicity, tied to kinship, promotes a convergence of interests between individuals and their kin group's collective goals.

Consequently, even racism and ethnocentrism can be viewed as extreme forms of nepotistic behavior driven by feelings of propinquity and consanguinity. Primordialists thus note nationalism as a natural phenomenon.

In contrast, the **constructivist theory** views ethnic identities as a product of human actions and choices, arguing that they are constructed and transmitted, not genetically inherited, from the past.[4] Max Weber was one theorist who stressed the social origin of ethnic identity. Weber viewed each ethnic group as a "human group" whose belief in a common ancestry (whether or not based in genetic reality) leads to the formation of a community,[5] concluding that ethnic identity is not primarily a genetic phenomenon, but rather a result of circumstances and political environment.[6]

Constructivists believe that nationalism is an eighteenth-century European phenomenon and an ideological creation. Various constructivists have suggested that the desire to build armies and improve military capabilities, the failure of industrialization to create a homogeneous cultural structure and market, and the development of a standardized communication systems all made it possible to imagine and invent communities.[7] The imagined, arrogated and ascribed national character facilitating the nation-building process consequently promoted nationalism in Europe.

While nationalism led to stronger, more integrated states in Europe, the process involved multiple wars over several generations as well as forced displacement and several genocides of millions of people. Will the construction of nationalism in today's developing nations inevitably lead to the same tragic fate? Is Sri Lanka's violence a reflection of European history and a harbinger of the future for the third world?

Other scholars emphasize the **pre-colonial roots** of the ethno-political conflict in Sri Lanka, Formerly known as Ceylon. Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms existed long before the Portuguese captured the island in 1505, and the Sinhalese and Tamil kingdoms fought to extend their boundaries in ancient Sri Lanka.[8] The present stage of the conflict thus echoes an historic pattern. Conflicts between the Mende and Temne in Sierra Leone similarly predated colonialism. The Maronities and Druze in what is now Lebanon fought long before the arrival of the Ottomans, and the Acholi and Langi clashed intermittently in pre-colonial Uganda.[9] The old hostilities still play significant roles in influencing the current stage of these ethno-political conflicts, thus hindering the process of nation building.

The **Colonial History** theorists contend that the contemporary pattern of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka have been largely shaped by its colonial history. The colonial process created borders, which included or divided ethnic groups and defined the demographic mixture of the colonies that eventually became countries. Colonialism's divide-and-rule policies, census taking, and promotion of ethnic identities all enhanced (and sometimes even created) cultural and ethnic distinctions in colonial societies, although these processes by themselves can hardly account for the nationalistic conflict unleashed in the post-colonial areas.[10]

Problems arose when colonial rulers favored and allied with a particular group, often a minority, to help in colonial administration. A minority, after all, could be more trusted to ally with an outside power. The minority might preferentially receive education and then share in political and economic power. When independence came, such a group found itself in a precarious position, as the majority group sought to gain

political and economic power. When the majority groups seize power from the former administrators and marginalize the minority group politically and economically, then the minority might either struggle for power or for secession.[11]

This perspective helps to explain Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Since independence, the majority Sinhalese confronted minorities, particularly the Tamils, who had previously occupied administrative positions during the British rule of the country. Sinhalese politicians in the postcolonial period exploited imbalance and relied on ethnic emotions to win Sinhalese political support to capture and hold political power.[12] S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike laid the first foundation for such an ethnicization of politics by introducing the Sinhala-Only language policy in the 1950's. Repeatedly over the next four decades, Sinhala politicians employed the same ethnic tricks to capture a large share of the Sinhalese votes. Sinhalese politicization of ethnic emotions in the Southern parties of Sri Lanka brought parallel processes in which Tamil moderate nationalists effectively utilized Tamil ethnic solidarity to win the elections. The ethnicization of the Sinhala polity subsequently produced Tamil militants, notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a secessionist Tamil guerrilla movement. The LTTE became dominant after 1975 by killing opponents, including some moderate Tamil leaders who believe in the principle of non-violence. De Votta recognizes that the ethnicization of Sri Lanka's political system by the Sinhalese leaders eventually radicalized the Tamils and produced the LTTE.[13] In fact, such Tamil radicalization gained greater support among the Tamil polity after the Sinhalese leaders refused political compromise with the Tamil leaders. Within his research on ethnic conflict, Professor De Silva, a noted Sinhala historian,

thoroughly examines the process whereby Tamil radicalization occurred on the island of Sri Lanka.[14]

The **modernization theory** maintains that when colonies became independent countries, modern values would spread and indigenous inhabitants would be less influenced by traditional ethnic or religious loyalties. In this theory, greater political and economic interaction among people, coupled with widespread education and mass communication networks, would breakdown parochial identities of ethnic and religious groups and replace them with loyalty to larger communities such as Nigeria, Indonesia, or emerging pan-African or a future Asian Community.

However, political developments of the 1980's and 1990's in both the post-colonial and the Western worlds have clashed with this prediction. In Sri Lanka, ethnic loyalty was strengthened, not weakened, by nation building efforts and the modernization of society. As Ted Robert Gurr pointed out, ethnic leadership provided strong networks that form the basis for political mobilization.[15] Rising competition among Sri Lankans to dominate economic and political resources, particularly between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, essentially diminished the chance for a common national identity to develop, especially as Sinhalese leaders established laws that grossly favored the majority Sinhalese. Prominent Sri Lankan scholars such as such as K. N. O. Dharmadasa, Kumari Jayawardena, Jayadeva Uyangoda, and Ananda Wickeremeratne, explore how modernization processes led by the Sinhalese leaders effectively marginalized the Tamil minority.[16] These authors argue that intensification of social mobilization in Sri Lanka generated ethnic conflict. Their works on Sri Lanka ethnic conflict and modernity support the prediction of Karl. W. Deutsch who believed that social mobilization could generate

ethnic conflict between different groups that compete for limited economic and political opportunities.[17]

More recent scholars have elaborated on this theme. John R. Bowen notes that people began to see themselves as members of vast ethnic groups, only during the modern period of colonization and state-building.[18] Rogers Brubaker also suggestes that conflict between different ethnic groups arises because of the increase in competition for the domination of the modern politics.[19] The expanded role and power of the state intensifies elite competition and contributes to conflict between ethnic groups.

POLITICIZATION OF ETHNIC TENSIONS

Given the numerous cleavages and tensions in post-colonial societies, the factor that influences whether and how communal violence breaks out is the way that the political system deals with the tensions. Do political leaders aggravate the tensions until they explode in violence? Do they recruit people to instigate acts of violence and then condone and protect them? Or do they seek non-violent resolution of problems and ensure that proponents and initiators of violence are punished?

In many cases, elite political leaders believe they can win support and strengthen their positions by mobilizing along ethnic cleavages. They anticipate that appeals to ethnicity are particularly effective in expanding their power. Leaders sometimes encourage followers to use crude violence – pogroms or ethnic cleansing, or exploit ethnic tensions in electoral politics. Outbidding opponents along ethnic lines is one of the strategies to win votes in (fragmented) societies that hold elections. This process frequently results in a polarization of the political system into ethnic divisions and a possible breakdown into violence. Marginalized minorities may suffer, emigrate, or fight

back with the weapons of the weak – terrorism and/or guerrilla activities. Elites manipulate ethnic identities in their quest for power,[20] and these processes can either deliberately or unexpectedly trigger ethnic conflict.[21] This paper will emphasize the manner in which elite political strategies have politicized ethnic relations and aggravated tensions, leading to serious violence in Sri Lanka.

Historical processes often give rise to tensions and conflicts between difficult ethnic groups, but politicians provide the sparks that ignite the violence. They often do so deliberately, because they believe they can strengthen their personal political positions. They work with two tools, raw violence and votes. These dynamics are clear from a review of Sri Lanka's ethnic violence.

The politicization of ethnic differences began in the 1950s. Successive Sinhalese political parties formulated policies such as the Sinhala Only Language Act in 1956, which made Sinhala the *only* official language in state and public affairs and sharply discriminated against Tamil speakers. Then an educational standardization policy in 1972 allowed Sinhalese students to enter Science and Medicine schools with lower scores than the Tamil students. The Constitution of 1972 conferred a special status on Buddhism in both the state and public sectors. The reason for all of these policies was, in Downs's language, "to win elections."[22] In Sri Lanka, of course, this meant to satisfy the Sinhalese voters. This naturally created an environment of distrust between the Sinhalese and Tamils,[23] while eroding Tamil faith in the democracy of Sri Lanka.[24] Violence accompanied these culturally biased policies. Scholarly works on the Sri Lanka ethnic conflict suggest that communal riots in 1958, 1961, 1974, 1977 and 1983 in which Tamils were killed, maimed, robbed and rendered homeless were carefully designed by

the Sinhala elites.[25] This persistent pattern of violence set the stage for violent Tamil retaliation and efforts to secede.

The incident in 1983, known as Black July, is particularly well documented. Approximately two thousand Tamils were killed in July/August 1983 by Sinhalese mobs in an attempt to begin genocide (or at least ethnic cleansing) of the Tamils. Human Right Watch documented the cruelty of the 1983 "state sponsored" Sinhalese riots. "Many neighborhoods were destroyed and nearly 100,000 Tamils in Colombo were displaced. Evidence suggested government collusion in the riots."[26] Further, an eye witness who rescued a Tamil employee of the state media company-Lake House described the cruelty of the day:

> Well organized gangs that had the blessings of powerful Government politicians mainly from the city of Colombo began their orgy of murder, looting and arson in broad daylight while the Police and the Armed Forces appeared to be helpless. I remember taking a vehicle out of Lake House to Wattala, with my colleagues also taking a Tamil accountant at Lake House, Mr. Edward, who also lived in Wattala. Five colleagues and the driver were all Sinhalese and we kept Mr. Edward between us in the middle of the vehicle and at each 100 meters or so gangs armed with clubs, swords and knives stopped each vehicle and inspected them to see whether any passenger or driver was a Tamil. Smoke filled the streets of Colombo and while we were leaving Lake House a flourishing textile shop, Sarathas was being looted while the armed forces and police were turning a blind eye to the crime.

With respect to the state's role behind the violence, the witness reported:

> …most notable matter that was observed was that the gangs carried official Householders Lists and stopped their vehicles in front of the homes or offices of the Tamil people. If the UNP Government of J. R. Jayewardene had not provided them with those official documents, how could the gangs have had access to them? It meant two things. The Government deliberately delayed the burial of the corpses of the soldiers on July 24 to plan an attack on the Tamil people in Colombo and the suburbs to provide their own goons with documents to make sure that only Tamils were attacked. Any other political party or group could not have managed both these things without State power.[27]

Neither the Sinhala ruling elite nor state institutions openly condemned or took any meaningful immediate measures to prevent the violence against the Tamil civilians from spreading to the other parts of the island from Colombo.[28] Instead J.R. Jayewardene, then President of Sri Lanka, referred to the mobs as a "mass movement by the generality of the Sinhalese people" and praised the mobs as heroes of the Sinhalese people.[29] Jayewardene's complicity was reflected in the interview he gave to Ian Ward, a British journalist, prior to the anti-Tamil pogrom of 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...[30]

The Sinhalese atrocities against the Tamils continued unabated even after the notorious ethnic violence in 1983. According to Human Rights Watch, after 1983, tens of thousands of people ended their life in prison cell.[31] Several studies accuse Sinhala politicians of institutionalized anti-Tamil violence and atrocities.[32] S.J. Tambiah reported that the Sinhalese ruling elites hired some Sinhalese to butcher the Tamils.[33] The evidence suggests that the Sinhalese who were hired by local Sinhala politicians to kill the Tamils are deprived and they did it for some economic benefits.[34]

It is evident that the violence and ethnocentric policies of the Sinhala ruling elites contributed to the growth of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. Tamil moderate parties, such as the Federal Party (FP) led by skillful politicians such as S.J.V. Selvanayakam, articulated frustration among common Tamil people into a 'defensive nationalism' with peaceful protests. However, Sinhalese collective, competitive chauvinism responded violently to the Tamil moderates. A former Premier of Sri Lanka noted during his visit to

the United States, that "the Tamils tried peaceful protests which soon degenerated into violence. With the underlying grievances being unattended the stage was set for terrorists groups to emerge."[35] This background helps us to understand the birth of violent Tamil movements, particularly the LTTE, toward the end of the 1970s.

The LTTE eventually resorted to violence to secure a separate state, called Eelam. The LTTE claim that they are a product of the Sinhala violence and chauvinism, and hold the belief that Tamils will not win any justice from the Sinhala polity.[36] Many ordinary Tamils began to share similar sentiments after they became targets of Sri Lanka police and military retaliation against the LTTE's attacks on the state and its institutions.[37] The state justified violence against the Tamils in the name of protecting territorial integrity of the island. Yet, the violent actions of Sri Lanka forces against the Tamils further radicalized the average Tamils, thus providing a fertile opportunity for the ethnic Tamil recruitment to fight against the state. Therefore, the Tamil separatist movement is, in Neil de Votta's words, "Sinhalese-inspired."[38] The systematic growth of the LTTE shows that when a particular community feels is being continuously terrorized by the dominant ethnic/religious or political group, many will join a politico-military movement to resist the oppression and violence of the persecutors.[39]

Politicization of the ethnic distinctions increased when the LTTE indiscriminately used violence against Sinhalese villagers and bombed Buddhist shrines. These tactics have been used particularly since 1985. Although the LTTE did not target ordinary Sinhalese before 1977, as the ethnic conflict escalated, there were several incidents in the late 1980's involving Sinhalese civilians. In 1985, for example, a major attack was launched in Anuradhapura, in which many Sinhalese civilians were killed.[40] The

increased intensity of the government-LTTE war since 1995 has resulted in more

bombings in the south and renewed anxieties among southern Sinhalese. On January 25,

1998, these anxieties were intensified when an LTTE suicide bomber targeted the sacred

Temple of the Tooth (*Dalada Maligawa*) in Kandy, causing considerable damage to the

building, killing at least 13 people and injuring 20 more. Sinhalese were appalled by this

desecration. Further, the LTTE also violently expelled thousands of Northern Muslims,

and were responsible for the massacre of over 300 Muslims. More than 120 died in one

ghastly incident at prayer time inside the Katankudy mosque in Batticaloa district in

1991.[41] The LTTE considers it, as Bruce Matthews explains, "mutual terrorism."[42]

The LTTE violence against the Sinhalese gave justifications for the ruling and

opposition Sinhalese politicians to continue perpetrating state military actions against the

Tamils. In April 1995, soon after the collapse of the peace talks between the LTTE and

the state, the Sri Lanka security forces launched a huge military campaign in the North.

Such state military attacks, which include air force bombing, are on going.[43]

At the same time, the Tamils condemned the state military actions and backed the

LTTE resistance to state violence. In Prof. K. Sivathamby words,

> In the name of fighting the LTTE, nearly every Tamil home and village in the
> northeast was bombed and shelled, and civilians massacred by the security forces
> indiscriminately. The number of refugees and displaced increased by the
> thousands. The war was becoming a combat between two armies involved in
> positional warfare and the people were out of it. The Tamil people of Batticaloa,
> Trincomalee, Mannar, the Wanni and Jaffna had to therefore seek the assistance
> of the LTTE to safeguard life and limb from the excesses of the armed forces.
> Under these circumstances, the LTTE developed its own system of administration
> to look after the needs of the Tamil civilian population of the northeast.[44]

However, on the political front, the Sinhalese elites fundamentally exploited the

Sinhalese sufferings at the hands of the LTTE to politicize the ethnic identities by

appealing to the Sinhalese emotions. The LTTE's brutality enabled the southern Sinhala politicians to *construct* fears about Tamil domination and aggression, which were the central elements in the historical teachings of the mythical 5th century *Mahavamsa*.[45] Also, the LTTE violence largely created an atmosphere of Sinhala hostility toward the Norwegian facilitated peace talks, and strengthened the grip of the Sinhala nationalist parties such as the SLFP, Jathike Hele Urumaya (JHU), and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP has exercised increasing influence among the Southern Sinhalese, particularly, the economically disadvantaged segments of the population.

Political movements generally manipulate ethnic or religious emotions to gain the sympathies of the masses. Such movements can likely generate reasonable amount of sympathy among ordinary people when they appeal to emotional symbols such as blood, flag, national anthem, history of group, or myth of motherland and fatherland. The rise of the JVP in democratic politics can be understood within this framework. The JVP retaliated with two failed rebellions against the Sri Lanka state in 1971 and 1987-89, throughout which an estimated 50,000 people were killed. When it tried to transform itself into a political party, it found difficulty in winning the Sinhalese votes. The UNP and SLFP were already in fierce competition to win Sinhalese support. However, the JVP thoughtfully decided to take advantage of Sinhalese fears in order to outbid the UNP and SLFP, which are, according to the Tamil nationalists, fundamentally pro-Sinhalese but still slightly favor political moderation. When the JVP employed the famous anti-Tamil/federal policies, which have roots in former premier S.W.R.D. Bandaranayke's Sinhala-Only rhetoric in 1956, it was surprisingly successful, winning 10 parliamentary seats in the 2000 elections, 16 seats in 2001, and 38 in the last general elections held in

2004.[46] The key factor is that the parliamentary seats won by the JVP all represent the deep Southern and urban West, where poor Sinhalese are largely concentrated.

Further, as part of its regular strategy to outbid its opponents on anti-Tamil or anti-LTTE programs, the JVP systematically politicized the ethnic emotions. It opposed the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA), which was signed in February 2002[47] and halted more than two decades of ethnic civil war. The JVP also opposed the Post Tsunami Operation Management (P-TOMS), commonly known as Joint Mechanism (JM), signed in June 2005, in which the LTTE acted as a chief partner to distribute international aid equally to the North East.[48] Both agreements were signed by the Sri Lankan government of the time, however, the JVP demanded that the government make both the CFA and P-TOMS null and void, because it believed that the democratically elected government should not engage in any political dealings with the "terrorists" who targeted the lives of ordinary Sinhalese as well as members of the Sinhalese-dominated security forces.[49] On July 15, 2005, the Supreme Court invalidated the government-signed P-TOMS pact with the LTTE. [50] The LTTE, co-author of the aid pact, voiced frustration over the ruling of the Supreme Court and said the ruling was "neither surprising nor is this the first time the Sri Lankan courts have denied justice to Tamils."[51]

The JVP also opposes the Norwegian-brokered peace process, aimed at building a power-sharing democracy based on a federal formula.[52] It believes that Norwegian mediation compromises the island's unitary structure, a kind of political symbol of the Sinhalese. Many Sinhalese, as *Mahavamsa* advocates, believe that the entire island is the sacred home of the Sinhalese and Buddhism.[53] Thus, the Sinhalese believe that power-sharing with the Tamils beyond the unitary formula, in other words, under the federal

structure, as nothing less than the thin end of the wedge of a separatist state. To consolidate its position among the Sinhalese, the JVP, prior to the local council elections on March 30, 2006, reaffirmed its anti-Norway position, and it categorically stated that "if Norway is not sacked immediately from the peace process, we will amass more than two hundred thousand people in a protest demonstration in front of the Norwegian Embassy."[54] The basic premise here is that the JVP took advantage of the LTTE's violence against the Sinhalese. Using this approach, it made rapid gains in the Sri Lanka parliament and became the third most powerful political force in Sri Lanka.

The political development in southern Sri Lanka proves that in a democratic society, when a group claiming to represent the marginalized violently targets the masses of the dominant polity, it is highly likely that ethnic politicians of the dominant polity will exploit such violence to politicize the system with ethnic emotions. This therefore marginalizes the moderate politicians who seek a compromise to end the violent disputes.[55] The election campaigns in Sri Lanka since 1987 support this theory[56] and the November 2005 presidential elections followed by the Supreme Court ruling on P-TOMS is a case in point.

2005 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND RADICALIZATION OF THE POLITY

Sri Lanka held its fifth Presidential elections on November 17, 2005. The United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) nominated Mahinda Rajapakshe commonly considered a Sinhala nationalist, as a Presidential candidate, while the UNP picked liberal-leaning Ranil Wickramasinghe. Rajapakshe emotionalized his campaign with his anti-Tamil and

anti-devolution campaign and portrayed himself as a hero of the Sinhalese:[57] He extolled Sinhalese history, promised to abrogate Tsunami pact with the LTTE, and to radically amend the Norwegian sponsored no-war treaty of 2002. He blamed Western countries, particularly Norway, for his country's current peace crisis, waved lion flags, and kissed babies and school students.[58] Most importantly, Premier Rajapakse sealed an electoral deal with the JVP[59] and JHU, the parties that opposed political relationship with the LTTE. On the other hand, Wickramasinghe promised an honorable political solution based on a federal political formula in accordance with the Oslo communiqués of 2002,[60] a political document brokered by Norway.

The parties representing the minorities opposed Rajapakse's political position and his affiliations with the Sinhala extremists.[61] As a result, they (except the TNA) endorsed the UNP candidate. The LTTE and the TNA boycotted the elections. They maintained that "the experience the Tamils have had over five decades, has taught them neither to trust the leading Sinhala political parties nor to have faith in their leadership."[62]

The elections provided a slight victory to Premier Mahinda Rajapakshe. He secured a little over 50% of the popular vote against the main opposition rival Ranil Wickramasinghe, who gained 48.43% of the votes.[63] The vote statistics evidenced the fact that Rajapakse secured most votes of the majority Sinhalese who predominantly live in Southern, Western and Northwestern provinces, while Wickramasinghe won most votes by the minorities who concentrate in the North East, Central and part of the Western provinces of Sri Lanka.

Soon after the elections, Rajapakshe took early steps to politicize the state institutions; he appointed Ratnasiri Wickramanayke as Premier of the island.

Wickramanayake is well known for his pro-war and Sinhala nationalistic stand. He also appointed H.M.B.G. Kotakadeniya, the high ranking officer of the Sinhala nationalist JHU, as a Defense Ministry's public safety adviser. In addition, he filled the state media institutions with anti-peace journalists. Politicization of the state institution by the Sinhalese leaders further encouraged the Tamil ethnic leaders to adhere strictly to Tamil nationalist ideologies. Also, such politicization in the south popularizes the violent ideologies embraced by the LTTE among fellow Tamils, as Tamils increasingly lose trust in the Sinhala polity.

In electoral politics, parties need to compete for the votes.[64] When a particular party in ethnically divided societies attempts to politicize ethnic identities for electoral gains, it is likely that other parties will follow a similar strategy to win votes. As a result, the political leaders of the minorities/weaker sections may adopt similar electoral strategies, which may lead to an increase in violence among the people, particularly the marginalized. This explains some key reasons for the rise of Sinhala extremism and Tamil violence in Sri Lanka, particularly during election time.

Sri Lanka's ethnic strife highlights the violence that can result from the politicization of ethnic differences, particularly when one party systematically reacts to another's violence through retaliation. The LTTE believe that Tamil youths are compelled to employ violence because the successive Sri Lanka governments since independence have reacted violently to the demands of Tamil moderate parties, and even terrorized the community with genocide.[65] Equally, the Sri Lanka government, controlled by the majority Sinhalese, justifies its violence against the Tamils and the LTTE as a means of safeguarding territorial integrity of the Sinhalese-dominated Island.

The net result is the polarization of Sri Lankan society, with Sinhalese deeply distrustful of Tamils and vice versa.

CONCLUSION: SEPERATION OR CONSOCIATION

Ethnicity exists, and there are numerous reasons why historical processes and modernization can increase tensions between groups. It is all too easy (and tragic) for political elites to politicize ethnic identities in a way that converts tension into violence. This study argues that the conflict in Sri Lanka is a result of the politicization of ethnic differences by the Sinhala elites in their quest for power. Tamils eventually feel so powerless that they resort to a campaign of violence coupled with suicide bombing, resulting in the deaths of thousands.

The future offers three alternatives. One possibility is that sporadic ethnic war will snowball into pogroms, ethnic cleansing, emigration, and genocide. Violence leads to retaliation and counter-retaliation, as society rides a downward spiral of destruction. As Chaim Kaufmann points out, "war itself destroys the possibilities for ethnic cooperation."[66] The second alternative is to seek a solution that provides guarantees for security, stability and ethnic peace, which can materialize in ethnically divided societies through restructuring the state system with power sharing (consociational democracy). Such a peaceful resolution can not be won by force.

Conflict resolution literature highly recommends power-sharing as a feasible solution to guarantee the security and stability of ethnic groups. Arend Lijphart's power-sharing package could help to assure security and stability of the ethnic Tamils and the redistribution of power away from the Sinhala elite's political agenda. His model of

consociational democracy consists of two major elements: power sharing and group autonomy. Consociational democracy, according to Lijphart, "denotes the participation of representatives of all significant communal groups in political decision making, especially at the executive level; group autonomy means that these groups have authority to run their own internal affairs…"[67]

Lijphart's recommendations in one way or another have been demanded by the moderate Tamil political leaders since independence. The Sinhalese ruling elites offered political concessions (including the tsunami Pact in June 2005) to discourage the Tamil resistance. Unfortunately, all the consociation arrangements since independence have succumbed to violent opposition from the Sinhalese voters, motivated by the nationalists' outbidding tactics and extremist Sinhala-Buddhist monks.[68] Thus, many Tamils are completely convinced that Sinhala political elites would not offer any *meaningful power-sharing democracy* or federal system. Therefore, the Tamils want the world to recognize their quest for ethnic separation.[69] In November 2006, the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran warned that the Sinhala nation "has left the Tamils with only one option, political independence and statehood for the people of Tamil Eelam."[70]

If there is a resistance to power sharing, the third option is partition. The demand for separation becomes strong when a power-sharing arrangement is not possible. Some fear that partition will further strengthen the ethnic hostilities between two nations, but even if it provokes a period of violence, it would offer the separated ethnic groups much-needed stability and security in the future. In other words, partition can reduce the ethnic fear and offers social and political security, as well as stability, to the different ethnic groups. The separation of Pakistan from India, Eritrea from Ethiopia, Bangladesh from

West Pakistan, and Greeks from Turks on Cyprus all demonstrate that partition can be helpful, even if it is not completely successful in terminating violence. The world recognizes that if the people of one nation do not want to co-habit in the same polity, then partition should not be automatically neglected as a solution. This might be one way to manage the Tamils' demands for political space since 1977.

Sri Lanka desperately needs ethnic peace because there has already been too much blood shedding. The road is still wide open for a political solution: either separation or consociation. Both options would be preferable to continued violence. Given the history of not reaching a peaceful solution, perhaps assistance from the international community chiefly led by the United Nations is needed in order to find a sensible resolution.

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[28] Bruce Matthews, **"**Radical Conflict and the Rationalization of Violence in Sri Lanka," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 59. No 1 (Spring 1986): 28-44.

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[31] Jo Becker, Human Rights Watch, *Op. Cit*, p. 7.

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[33] S.J. Tambiah, *Ibid*.

[34] An interview with three Sinhalese who declined to disclose their name. They acknowledged their role in violence against the Tamils in Colombo on July 24, 1983. According to them, they were asked by the local Sinhala politician who offered some bottles of local alcohol and 500/=SLR each to loot and burn the Tamils shops as much as they can with others, who were on the same mission on the same day. An interview was held on July 25, 2004

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[36] Liberation Tigers and Tamils Eelam Freedom Struggle, book publication no. 4, 1983, pp. 16-35.

[37] Phone and email Interviews with some final year undergraduate Jaffna and Eastern University students in Sri Lanka. August 15-27, 2005.

[38] Neil De Votta, *Op.Cit.*

[39] Ted Robert Gurr and Harff Barbara, *Op. Cit*.

[40] Elizabeth Nissan and R.L Stirrat, "The generation of communal identities," in *Sri Lanka: History and the roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer (London: Routledge, 1990), P.38.

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[48.] JM taken to courts, http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2005/06/050627_jvp_courts.shtml.

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[53] Interview with five Sinhalese undergraduates from the Ruhunu University, Matara, Sri Lanka. January 05, 2002.

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