

Sri Lanka: The Conflict Environment

Sri Lanka is faced with a situation of not one but several parallel and partly inter-linked conflicts at different levels of magnitude, and different stages of violent/non-violent manifestation. Some of the factors that have been associated with the exacerbation of violent conflicts in Sri Lanka are: the politicization of ethnicity; poverty; social status; and lack of access to political power, educational mobility and economic opportunity. In addition, smaller-scale, and usually localized, conflicts have erupted on the basis of competition over resources.

The twenty-year armed conflict for and against a LTTE¹-spearheaded “homeland” in the North and East for the minority *Tamil* population² has affected every part of the Sri Lankan society, economy and polity for almost 20 years. To compound matters, the conflict contains sub-conflicts between Tamil militant groups; between Tamils and Muslims in the East; and between displaced people and host-communities in the western and central parts of the country. The other major fault line for violent-prone conflict in Sri Lanka is found within the majority (74%) *Sinhalese* population itself. Driven by economic, social and nationalist issues, especially the rural youth, this conflict erupted into violent insurrections in 1971 and 1988-89. Commonalities between the country’s two major conflicts include that they: (a) have sprung out of a perceived need for social and political change; (b) were driven largely by limited opportunities for young people in rural areas which had been strained of public and private investments compared to other parts of the country; and (c) turned hyper violent.

The human suffering from the many years of armed conflict includes lost lives, disappearances, repeated displacement, dependencies on relief handouts, insecurity, fear, harassment, hatred, distrust, fragmented families, and disrupted education. The conflict situation has had a profoundly negative effect on the Sri Lankan society. Animosity and distrust between, and within, the ethnic groups are found in every part of the country, and create divides between neighbors, colleagues and family members. The “winners” who benefit financially from predatory activities include members of militant groups extorting from civilians and larger businesses who have managed to secure monopoly of trade to the government-controlled Jaffna peninsula in the North.

The conflict has increased the militarization of society, and has led to a surge in violent crimes. The murder and armed robbery rates in Sri Lanka in 1996 were far higher than in the rest of South Asia. Government security arrangements, which include controls over the movement of people and goods, have often intimidated the civilians they are meant to protect, and further fueled hatred and conflict. Restrictions on farmers and fishermen inhibit them from accessing their fields and fishing sites, and from the tools and means necessary for their livelihoods. The economic impact at the household and community levels has been devastating.

The conflict has taken a huge toll on the Sri Lankan economy and is estimated to have cost at least two years of GDP. Government defense expenditure accounts for some four to six percent of GDP, among the highest in the world. Public relief expenditure and the costs affiliated with damaged infrastructure are also high. In addition to direct conflict-created poverty among the population in the North and East caused by displacement and disrupted production, a slow-down in overall economic growth adversely affects attempts to reduce poverty country-wide.

¹ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

² 13% nationally, 65% in the Northeastern Province (1981)