Appendix I

The Root Causes of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka[1]

Background

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has many root causes and consequences that are closely inter-linked. However, given its complexities, it should not be assumed that these causes are part of linear historical processes where one event led to another. Often many of the issues that may be regarded as root causes arose within a single but extended context and equally as often, simultaneously. It is primarily within the context of ethnic politics that language and education policy can be located. However, for discussion purposes it is necessary to separate these issues as clearly identifiable themes that would emerge in any analysis of the Sri Lankan conflict. In general, these themes can be broadly identified as:

- Ethnic politics and the interpretation of the past;
- Politics of language;
- Politics of education; and
- Other factors, including employment and land.

Demographic Patterns

Sri Lankan society is an ethno-religious mosaic[2] and within the ethnic groups, there are clear religious divisions as well[3]. To a certain extent, ethnicity and religion also have a regional basis, which is a significant reason why the Tamil militancy has a strong geographical dimension, which extended to the demand of a separate independent state. Of the ethnic and religious groups, Tamil Hindus predominate in the Northern Province and maintain a significant presence in the Eastern Province. The Eastern Province is an ethnically mixed area where Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese are found in sizeable numbers even though Tamils have a slightly higher statistical edge. Indian Tamils—the descendants of laborers brought from Southern India by the British in the 19th century to work on tea and coffee estates—are concentrated in parts of the Central, Uwa and Sabaragamuwa Provinces. Sinhalese Buddhists predominate in all parts of the country except the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Muslims have a significant concentration in the Eastern Province, but generally are scattered throughout the country. Christians maintain a significant presence in the coastal areas as a result of over 500 years of constant European colonial presence and the consequent Christianization of significant numbers of the population in these areas. However, Christians are found in all parts of the country in small numbers. Malays are mostly concentrated in and around the city of Colombo and the Western Province.

By the time Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948 from the UK, there were expectations that the country would become a model democracy. Universal adult franchise had been introduced in the

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[1] This draws heavily from "The Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Historical and Sociopolitical Outline", by Dr. Sasanka Perera, of the Department of Sociology, the University of Colombo, December 1999. At the time this paper was written, Dr. Perera was a full-time staff member of the World Bank. The views and opinions expressed here are those of the CAS team and do not necessarily represent those of the World Bank or the Government of Sri Lanka.

[2] Based on 1981 statistics, the population is as follows: Sinhalese: 74.0%; Sri Lankan Tamils: 12.7%; Indian Tamils: 5.5%; Muslims: 7.1%; Burghers: 0.3%; Malays (followers of Islam): 0.3%; and numerous other small groups: 0.2%.

[3] Buddhists make up 69.3% of the population; Hindus, account for 15.5%; Muslims—who constitute the only ethnic group who have a single term to denote ethnicity and religion—along with Malays (also Muslims) account for 7.6%. Christians account for 7.4%.

1931, democratic institutions and traditions had been in place and political violence was not an issue. Moreover, by the 1950s literacy in Sri Lanka was on the rise and there were no serious indicators of economic or social catastrophes of the years to come. However, even before independence, there were clear indications of ethnic politics that were to emerge later.

The Emergence of Ethnic Politics

Relations between Tamils and Sinhalese have not always or consistently been antagonistic. This happened only in times of external threats from South India after the formulation of clear Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic or cultural identities in the 9th (or 12th) century. These wars were wars of dominance fought between regional rulers and were not 'race' wars as defined later. Historical chronicles compiled by Sinhalese Buddhist monks defined these wars as campaigns undertaken to protect Buddhism and the Sinhalese nation. Mainly reinforced by formal education, many Sinhalese accept these problematic interpretations as fact today. In the eyes of many Sri Lankans, these interpretations seem to suggest a long and bloody tradition in which hope for reconciliation is minimal. Significantly, these interpretations—with their potent and emotional contents—have also found their way into school textbooks, which is an important aspect of social and political socialization in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Forces of Sinhalese nationalism perpetuating notions of eternal conflict with Tamils had been gathering strength since before independence. Many of them were Sinhalese-educated rural people whose nationalist aspirations for cultural transformation, power and status did not automatically materialize with independence. Soon after independence it was clear that a conflict was emerging between Sinhalese-educated rural elite and the English-educated urban ruling elite.

Meanwhile, one million Indian Tamils were disenfranchised in 1948 under the Ceylon Citizenship Act. Of this, approximately 350,000 were repatriated to India under the Indo-Ceylon Agreement of 1964. Over the years, subsequent governments conferred citizenship rights to the rest. The Ceylon Citizenship Act served to reinforce ethnic politics and reduced the electoral leverage of the Indian Tamils who remain an impoverished community today.

Ethnic Conflict and Language

In addition to the barriers imposed by the continued use of the English language as the official language after independence, the emerging nationalist forces perceived that Sri Lankan Tamils had access to a disproportionate share of power as a consequence of educational opportunities in the colonial period and were also disproportionately represented in the civil administration. Moreover, considerable mercantile interests were also controlled by non-Sinhalese groups. These fears and concerns were a basis for the politics of language that was to emerge.

As early as 1944, politicians proposed resolutions in Parliament to declare Sinhalese the official language, while other amendments proposed both Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages[4]. A 1944 resolution specified that Sinhalese and Tamil would become the languages of instruction in schools, examinations for public services and legislative proceedings. The resolution was approved by 27 to 2 in the Sinhalese-dominated legislature. Committees were established to advise on how these changes were to be implemented, however, there was little progress in implementing the policy. In 1956, S.W.R.D Bandaranaike was elected Prime Minister with a main election promise of establishing Sinhalese as the official language of the country, replacing English. The new government fulfilled this promise—through

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[4] In the colonial period, both Tamil and Sinhalese politicians espoused the idea of *swabasha*, which, literally translates into 'native languages'. By this, they meant that in the post independent period primacy of place should be given to local languages, namely Sinhalese and Tamil.

the passage of the so-called "Sinhalese Only Bill" (Official Language Act, No. 33 of 1956)—soon after the election giving no status of parity to the Tamil language.

The language issue in many ways brought the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict into the forefront of Sri Lankan politics. In terms of the dominant strands of Sinhalese nationalism, the Sinhalese language along with the Buddhist religion necessarily had to occupy the pre-eminent position in society. This was perceived to be the only way the glory of ancient Sinhalese civilization could be revitalized. Even though Tamil has been decreed an official language along with Sinhalese in terms of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (in 1987), the damage caused by the politics of language generally remain unaddressed. Moreover, the vast gap between the official recognition of Tamil as an official language and the practical implementation of the provisions and conditions it entails, is yet to be bridged.

Ethnic Conflict and Education

Since the 1970s, access to education—particularly access to higher education—has been ethnicized. In addition, many other aspects of education—including the structural organization of schools and universities, contents of textbooks and training of teachers—have impacted directly on ethnic conflict. Compared to other ethnic and religious groups in the country, Tamils have had strong cultural norms which valued education. Many Tamils attended English language schools which were the passport to higher education and better employment in the colonial period. As a consequence of well-funded American missionary activities, the Tamil-dominated Northern Province had comparatively better facilities for English language and pre-university education.

There was also a limit beyond which Tamils could not be absorbed within the traditional land-based occupations in the arid areas where they predominated. This further encouraged many to seek employment through education. The net result was the relative over-representation of Tamils in higher education, professions and the administration in comparison to their status in the general population[5].

In this context, post independence Sinhalese nationalism sought to curb the Tamil presence in education and thus also in the professions and civil administration. While the passing of the "Sinhalese Only Bill" was one attempt in this process, more direct hurdles were placed on the path of Tamils' realization of educational goals since the 1970s. The constitutional provisions in the 1972 Constitution favoring the Sinhalese language and Buddhist religion, along with their educational policies, convinced many Tamils that they had been perceived as a marginal community.

From 1971 onwards, a new "standardization" policy was adopted, which ensured that the number of students qualifying for university entrance from each language was proportionate to the number of students who sat for university entrance examination in that language[6]. In real terms this meant that Tamil speaking students had to score much higher than Sinhalese speaking students to gain admission to universities. This also meant that for the first time, the integrity of university admissions policy was tampered with by using ethnicity as a basis. In 1972, a district quota system was introduced

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[5] By independence, Tamils accounted for over 30% of government services admissions, a share larger than their proportion in the general population—i.e., Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils have never totaled more than 25%. By 1956, it is estimated that Tamils constituted 50% of the clerical personnel of the railway, postal and customs services, 60% of all doctors, engineers and lawyers, and 40% of other labor forces.

[6] Prior to this, individuals entered universities on the basis of national competitive examinations marked on a uniform basis. Those who scored highest, gained access to different faculties in universities irrespective of their ethnicity or districts from which they came. While there was no inherent bias, Tamils from Jaffna and Colombo did particularly well—e.g., in the 1969-1970 intake to science and engineering courses, Tamils constituted 35% and over 45% of the intake in medical faculties.

in order to benefit those not having adequate access to educational facilities within each language. These changes had a serious impact on the demographic patterns of university entry[7].

In general, these policies seriously impacted upon not only the chances of Tamils to gain access to higher education, but also on the overall process of ethnic relations as well. In 1977, the language-based admission policy was abolished and since that time various adjustments have been introduced on the basis of merit, district quotas, disadvantaged area quotas, etc. While the obvious ethno-linguistic discrimination of the 1971 policy has long been dismantled, many Tamil youth still feel that they are discriminated against in access to higher education.

Furthermore, the ethnic divisions in Sri Lanka tend to manifest within the education structure in a number of other ways—i.e., the organizational structure of educational institutions, the training of teachers and the content of textbooks and syllabi—which are much more long lasting and far more insidious than the more visible ethno-linguistic policies of the 1970s.

Related to the organizational structure of educational institutions, it is clear that language-based segregation takes place. This does not apply to privately-owned institutions in which instruction is in English, but applies to institutions with more than one language of instruction (such as some universities, mixed media schools and technical institutes) where a system of internal segregation takes place. In real terms Sinhalese students are segregated into Sinhalese-language schools and Tamil and Tamil-speaking Muslim students are segregated into Tamil-language schools. If they enter universities or technical institutes, this segregation is likely to continue unless they opt to, and have the money to receive, a non-segregated further education in English in private institutions[8].

The training of teachers poses similar problems, as most teachers in the system today are products of the segregated education system they are teaching in. Moreover, they are also trained in institutions that are internally segregated except in the training of teachers specializing in subjects such as English. Few teacher training institutions in operation today, have seriously taken into account the need to train teachers who can teach in a context keeping in mind the challenges of a multicultural society. There is a clear disjuncture between current state policy towards ethnic relations and the manner in which teachers are trained.

Since the early-1980s, many have stressed the role school texts play in shaping ethnic relations in the country. Ideally, school texts (e.g., texts used for teaching religion, language, social studies, etc.) should portray the multi-cultural reality of Sri Lankan society and address issues that are important in this context while approaching the prescribed subject matter. School texts have been written, supervised, produced and distributed by agencies of the state, meaning that their contents reflect state policy or thinking. Furthermore, ethnic politics have also been played out in the process of text production. In recent times some of the more problematic contents in these texts have been removed in the process of revision and re-writing[9]. Ironically however, sometimes this has gone to the opposite extreme—e.g., in some texts all references to ethnicity and related issues have been removed.

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[7] Tamil representation in the science-based disciplines fell from 35% in 1970 to 19% in 1975, while Sinhalese representation in all disciplines increased quite dramatically.

[8] Some state institutions (e.g., university departments where instruction is given in all three languages such as the Department of Law at the University of Colombo) are exceptions to this as students can opt for the medium of instruction of their choice. But given the legacy of segregated school education and the general poor state of English language education, very few have the required background or make the choice to educate themselves in a non-segregated environment even when given the choice.

[9] Support for development of new textbooks, along with teacher training is being provided under two on-going IDA projects: Second General Education (Cr. 3014-CE) and Teacher Education and Teacher Deployment (Cr. 2881-CE).

Ethnic Conflict and Employment

As mentioned above, both language and education policies have placed barriers on employment, especially in the administrative and professional ranks in which Tamils were at one point "over-represented." In the private sector—which for the most part continued to work in English—employment opportunities for Tamils and other minorities remained relatively open. As a result, today some of the leading business ventures in the country are Tamil-owned. However, as a result of the discrimination that has occurred in state sector employment practices over time, there is a tendency among many Tamils to perceive of themselves as generally discriminated against in employment. According to the census of public sector and corporate sector employment in 1990, Sri Lankan Tamils accounted for 5.9% of those employed in the state services. This represents a significant drop from earlier years.

Ethnic Conflict and the Issue of Land

The issue of ownership over and access to land has also been a consistent area in which ethnic politics in Sri Lanka have manifested, and have sustained themselves over the years. As noted, one of the peculiarities in the demographic patterns in Sri Lanka is the relative concentration of certain ethnic groups in certain geographical regions. The clearest site of politics of land and ethnicity has been in the sparsely populated areas of the dry zone in the North Central Province and the Eastern Province[10]. When post independence governments decided to settle poor Sinhalese farmers from the densely populated wet zone areas of the country, many Sinhalese politicians and people in general viewed the process as a "reclamation and recreation in the present of the glorious Sinhalese Buddhist past." The so-called "colonization schemes" became an integral aspect of Sinhalese Buddhist 'nation-building.'

Not surprisingly, the Tamils had a completely different perception of the colonization of the dry zone. The notion of the 'traditional Tamil homeland' became a potent component of popular Tamil political imagination. Since Sinhalese irrigation settlements in the North Central and Eastern Provinces occurred under direct state sponsorship, it appeared to many Tamils as a deliberate attempt of the Sinhalese-dominated state to marginalize them further by decreasing their numbers in the area. The colonization schemes did alter the demographic patterns, particularly in the Eastern Province in a significant way[11].

A decision was made in the late-1970s to accelerate the development of the dry zone through the "Accelerated Mahaweli Program," that provided for the opening up of dry zone areas further for agriculture and resettlement of people. Only in 1986, as a result of continuing Tamil agitations, did the government agree to allocate the remaining land under the Mahaweli Program on the basis of the ethnic distribution of each ethnic group in the total population.

Meanwhile, the Muslim community tended to reject the countervailing notion of a traditional Tamil homeland in the North East region. Growing cooperation between the security forces and Muslim home guards led to LTTE attacks on Muslim villages in the East, armed counter attacks on Tamil communities in the South East and to the eviction of 55,000 Muslims from the North in 1990 most of whom remain displaced today.

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[10]   The dry zone areas of the North Central Province had special socio-cultural significance for Sinhalese in term of their popular imagination of the past—i.e., it was area where a number of ancient Sinhalese capitals were located in a time considered as the "golden era of Sinhalese civilization." It was also where many of the ruins of these ancient cities and citadels continued to be a source of pride to many Sinhalese.

[11]   According to census data, the Sinhalese population—which constituted 3% of the population in the Trincomalee District in the east in 1921—was 30% in 1981. Similarly, Amparai District which used to be a largely Tamil and Muslim-majority area is now a Sinhalese-majority area.

Loss of Confidence in Non-violent and Democratic Politics

Ethnic politics and fears of discrimination led Tamil politicians in the Federal direction from a very early stage of recent Sri Lankan politics. Since the 1930s, and much more clearly since the 1950s, Tamil political parties have been asking for greater political autonomy for the areas in which they predominate. Such a devolution of power has been recognized at different times as a means to diffuse tensions between the two groups. A number of pacts had been formulated to define the modalities for devolution of power, including the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact in July 1957 that offered a framework for regional devolution. But due to various political pressures, the provisions of the pact were never implemented. In 1965, the Dudley-Chelvanayagam Pact was formulated and agreed upon. But, yet again the provisions of this pact—quite similar to the earlier one—were annulled.

The failure to implement these proposals led to Tamil demands for separation, instead of Federalism that they had been mostly seeking up to that point. On the part of many Tamils—particularly Tamil youth from the north—the failure of these pacts also marked a disintegration of confidence in parliamentary politics in general. In 1977, the Tamil United Liberation Front won an overwhelming electoral victory on a highly charged political platform of separatism. In 1980, the District Development Council Act was passed in Parliament and elections to the councils were held in July 1981. But given the lack of government commitment to decentralization of power, this attempt also proved to be a failure. After this point, there were clear indications that the politics of Tamil society were shifting from the commitment to parliamentary democracy (held by its conservative leaders) to a commitment to armed struggle (held by considerable sections of Tamil youth). In 1979, the government enacted the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act as a an interim measure, but in 1982 it was amended to be part of the permanent law.

The Emergence of Armed Conflict

Until the early-1980s, ethnic conflict was primarily limited to the political arena where destruction to property and life was minimal. However, violence had occurred on number of occasions, such as in the passing of the "Sinhalese Only Bill" in 1956. Similar ethnic riots involving Tamils and Sinhalese occurred in 1958, 1977 and 1981, with the most violent and destructive taking place in July 1983. Many observers see the violence of July 1983 as a turning point in the conflict.

After the early-1980s, such sporadic cases of violence gradually gave way to institutionalized political violence which became a main feature of the conflict. At this stage, organized or institutionalized political violence was widely utilized by both the political parties in power and Tamil youth who organized themselves into armed guerrilla outfits. This development marked the militarization and the steady brutalization of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

The failure of parliamentary politics and the entrenchment of ethnic politics which led to frustration among Tamil youth, eventually made some of these youth organize themselves into armed groups for the ostensible purpose of seeking independence from Sinhalese domination. The first of these groups was the Tamil Tigers which later came to be known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam or LTTE. In 1978, the Tamil Tigers carried out a series of bank robberies and also assassinated a number of police officers, many of whom were Tamil. Bank robberies and selected assassination of individuals within the Tamil community (who were considered traitors) later led to massacres of Sinhalese and Muslim civilians in the border villages and contested areas. By the 1980s, this phase in the evolution of political violence expanded to include indiscriminate bomb attacks in the Sinhalese-dominated south, particularly in Colombo. Subsequently, the conflict reached civil war proportions and Indian peace-keeping forces were sent to Sri Lanka in 1987. The Indian forces left in 1990 and the civil conflict between the Government and LTTE resumed three months later. The conflict escalated in the late-1990s with conventional battles being fought to capture territory.