By Elizabeth Nissan

Historical Context

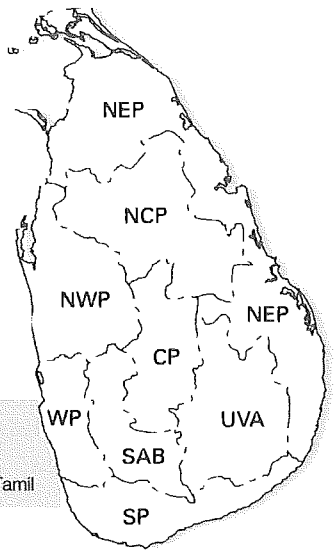
Although conflict on the present scale may not have been anticipated at independence, there were already signs that Ceylon's constitutional structure would be the source of considerable inter-group friction. Of most relevance were the fears expressed by the Ceylon Tamil political leadership that the unitary constitution would not give minorities adequate protection against the potentially discriminatory consequences of majoritarian Sinhalese rule.

Prior to independence, Tamil leaders had called for constitutional protections to allay these fears: specifically, that 50 per cent of parliamentary seats and cabinet posts should be reserved for minorities. Once this option was rejected, however, the Tamil leadership called for a federal constitutional structure, and for self-determination for the Tamil people within this framework. The Federal Party (FP), formed in 1949 after the government had disenfranchised the Up-country Tamil population, became a key voice in Tamil politics for well over two decades.

The Federal Party was unable to pursue its aims successfully, however, in the context of a parliamentary system dominated by parties which primarily represented Sinhalese interests. Worse, as Sinhala Buddhist cultural revivalism attained a new dominance in national politics in the mid-1950s, it brought with it policies which significantly disadvantaged Tamil speakers. As a consequence, Tamil leaders came to propose increasingly radical solutions to the Ceylonese, later Sri Lankan, ethnic problem.

The rise of Sinhala nationalism

The rise of Tamil militancy has to be understood in the context of the nationalist politics of the newly independent Ceylonese state. The British colonial period had seen the creation of an island-wide, unified administration for the first time, and English had become the language of government. The small English-speaking, local elite which developed in this period (spanning



Population and ethnicity in Sri Lanka

(sources: Sri Lanka Census of Population and Housing General Report (1981) and Statistical Abstract (1995), both publications of the Sri Lanka government)

	Population (000's, 1994)	Main ethnic groups (1981)
SRI LANKA	17,865	**74% Sinhalese** **13% Ceylon Tamil** 7% Muslim, 6% Up-country Tamil
Western Province (WP) (Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara)	4,599	**85% Sinhalese** 6% Muslim, 6% Ceylon Tamil
Northeastern Province (NEP) (Jaffna, Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar, Vavuniya, Kilinochchi)	2,645	**65% Ceylon Tamil** **18% Muslim** **13% Sinhalese**
Southern Province (SP) (Galle, Matara, Hambantota)	2,330	**95% Sinhalese**
Central Province (CP) (Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya)	2,261	**64% Sinhalese** **20% Up-country Tamil** 8% Ceylon Tamil, 7% Muslim
Northwestern Province (NWP) (Kurunegala, Puttalam)	2,107	**90% Sinhalese** 7% Muslim
Sabaragamuwa (SAB) (Ratnapura, Kegalle)	1,735	**87% Sinhalese** 9% Up-country Tamil
Uva Province (UVA) (Badulla, Monaragala)	1,102	**76% Sinhalese** **16% Up-country Tamil** 5% Ceylon Tamil
Northcentral Province (NCP) (Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa)	1,086	**91% Sinhalese** 7% Muslim

The Up-country Tamils

The Up-country Tamils were brought to Ceylon from southern India in the 19th century to work as indentured labourers on the tea plantations of the central highlands, newly established under the British colonial government. Despite having delivered the key primary product on which the Sri Lankan economy was built, Up-country Tamils have suffered civil and economic repression throughout their history in Sri Lanka. To date they have not been associated with the struggle for Tamil self-determination, their primary political organisation being through trade unions which have focused primarily on economic and franchise issues.

both Sinhala and Tamil communities) continued to hold power after independence and ruled in much the same vein as their colonial predecessors. English remained the language of government, while the vernacular-speaking majority saw little change, despite the hopes of cultural and political transformation that independence had appeared to offer.

In the southern provinces, tension increased between the Colombo-based, English-speaking ruling class and the Sinhala-speaking rural elites. The English language

represented a major barrier to advancement within the state for these latter groups. In addition, they felt that the Ceylon Tamil community (and in particular, the Jaffna Tamil community) had gained a disproportionate share of power. Tamils indeed held considerable business interests in the south as well as a large number of posts in the administration, having benefited from superior educational opportunities during the colonial era.

The Sinhala-educated rural elites were key players in mobilising nationalist sentiment and defeating the United National Party (UNP) government in the 1956 general election. They asserted a close identification between the Sinhala people, the island of Ceylon ('Sri Lanka') and the Buddhist religion, and sought redress on two key fronts: to remove the barriers to opportunity created by the formal status of English, and to correct what they saw as an unfair advantage enjoyed by Ceylon Tamils.

After the 1956 election, a government was formed by the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna coalition (People's United Front – MEP), led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The MEP promised that Buddhism would be restored to its rightful place in the polity (in keeping with Sinhala Buddhist ideology) and that Sinhala would become the official state language. From this date, the identification of the state and the interests of the Sinhala people became increasingly close.

The passing of the Official Language Act of July 1956 – which is often referred to as 'Sinhala Only' – was a major step towards defining Ceylon as a primarily Sinhala state. Under this legislation, Sinhala became the sole official language with clearly damaging implications for the employment prospects of many Tamil speakers. The denial of Tamil language rights was met with an intense non-violent protest campaign and the first of several outbreaks of anti-Tamil violence, particularly in the south and east.

Negotiations and non-violent protest

In August 1956, one month after the Official Language Act had been passed, the Federal Party made four main demands to the government. These were for a federal constitution; equality of status for the Tamil and Sinhala languages; granting of citizenship to the Up-country Tamils; and an immediate halt to government-sponsored Sinhalese resettlement in what were seen as traditional Tamil speaking areas. The Federal Party threatened a campaign of non-violent civil disobedience if their demands were not met.

Eleven months later, after significant non-violent agitation, Prime Minister Bandaranaike and Federal Party leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam agreed a pact which offered devolution of powers to Tamil speaking regional councils and recognition of Tamil as a national minority language. The pact also contained a government promise to reconsider the citizenship status of the Up-country Tamils, and pledges against future resettlement programmes in the north and east. Sinhala nationalist opposition to the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact was so strong, however, that it was publicly abrogated by Bandaranaike in April 1958. This was to be the first of several betrayals of agreements on Tamil grievances.

Before the general election in 1960, the Federal Party again set out its four demands. As the SLFP promised to implement reforms within three months on the basis of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact, the two parties entered into an electoral pact. On winning an outright majority, however, the SLFP ignored their agreement. Indeed, from the beginning of 1961, it instituted Sinhala as the language of administration throughout the island without any substantive concessions to Tamil speakers.

Repeatedly frustrated by the government's failure to act on its agreements, Tamil politicians stepped up their campaign of civil disobedience and non-violent protest (*satyagraha*). In the

south, such actions often provoked 'counter civil disobedience' by Buddhist monks and other Sinhala activists which heightened ethnic tension and polarisation.

In the north, the civil disobedience campaigns were met with a growing security presence and increased threats to personal liberty. In February 1961, the Federal Party launched its biggest campaign throughout the northeast to protest the implementation of Sinhala-only legislation. It had already called on Tamil government employees not to study Sinhala. It now requested that they not transact any business in Sinhala and that Tamil people correspond with the government in Tamil only. For several days in February 1961, protesters blocked access to the main administrative buildings in Jaffna. In response, Prime Minister Mrs Srimavo Bandaranaike declared a state of emergency and, for the first time, troops were moved into the area to regain control. In July, the government quickly closed the Federal Party's 'Tamil *Arasu* (state) postal service', which issued its own stamps through Jaffna district post offices. All Federal Party MPs were detained for the next six months.

The Federal Party tried again to reach a negotiated agreement in 1965, this time with the UNP. The Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact was similar to the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact in content, and was agreed to ensure Federal Party support in the creation of a coalition 'national government' under Senanayake. Again, however, the government failed to make good its promises; nor did it implement the Tamil Language Regulations that it published in 1966. In 1969, soon after a draft bill providing for new district councils was dropped under opposition pressure, the Federal Party withdrew from government altogether.

In 1970, Srimavo Bandaranaike returned to power as prime minister of the new United Front coalition government. A new constitution was adopted in May 1972, marking the birth of the Republic of Sri Lanka.

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Language policy since 'Sinhala Only'

Through the years, the language issue has remained a major grievance for Tamil speakers. Although legislation providing for 'reasonable use of Tamil' was passed in August 1958, the regulations for its implementation were not created until 1966, and even then were not implemented. The new republican constitution of 1972 reiterated the inferior status of Tamil, declaring Sinhala the only official language.

The status of Tamil changed under the 1978 constitution, which incorporated the provisions of the 1958 Tamil language legislation and the 1966 Tamil Language Regulations. Following the Indo-Lanka Accord, the 13th constitutional amendment of 1987 further enhanced the status of Tamil, making it an official language alongside Sinhala and English. Even today, however, monolingual Tamil speakers remain at a considerable disadvantage in their dealings with the state and in commercial and business life outside the northeast. Despite the efforts of the Official Languages Commission, government language policies have often not been implemented: many state institutions still issue forms in Sinhala only or in Sinhala and English.

'Colonisation' in the north and east

Beginning in the British colonial era, new irrigation works had opened up large tracts of land in the dry zone areas of the north and east, which were very thinly populated. These projects continued well into the 1980s and were complemented by state-sponsored schemes bringing poor Sinhala farmers from the crowded south to settle these lands. Successive governments represented these policies as developmental and environmental good sense. Many Tamils feared, however, that the primary intention was to alter the demographic balance and undermine their claim to a northeast Tamil homeland. Resettlement is still a highly politicised issue.

"In the early 1970s, increasing numbers of Tamils felt the state considered them secondary citizens, as language and education policies in particular threatened the futures of many Tamil youths"

Entrenching Sinhala Buddhist ideology, the constitution afforded Buddhism the 'foremost place' in the state and confirmed Sinhala as the only official language. It also marked a new era in Tamil politics. From 1956 to 1972, Tamil leaders had responded to the Sinhala Buddhist domination of politics by asserting federalist demands and through civil disobedience campaigns. The 1970s, however, saw the emergence of considerably stronger tactics and demands.

The rise of Tamil separatism

In the early 1970s, increasing numbers of Tamils felt the state considered them secondary citizens, as language and education policies in particular threatened the futures of many Tamil youths. The two main political parties in the south — the UNP and the SLFP — had both reneged on pacts with the Tamil leadership while in government and kindled communal flames when in opposition. In short, a deepening distrust had developed of Sinhalese politicians and national politics in general.

As a consequence of these developments, a new militancy grew up within Tamil politics. In May 1972, the Tamil United Front (TUF) was formed, including the main representatives of both Sri Lankan and Up-country Tamils. The TUF's demands expanded on those made earlier by the FP, reflecting Tamil concern at the growing 'Sinhalisation' of the state, but they still fell short of calling for secession. Then, in May 1976, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was established. No longer was there a call for decentralised government or a federal state. In the Vaddukoddai Resolution, adopted on 14 May 1976, the TULF declared that all attempts to co-operate with governments had failed and that only through a separate Tamil state could Tamil historical grievances be met.

The TULF won dramatic victories in the 1977 general election in northern and eastern constituencies. While the strength of popular support for Tamil secessionism was confirmed,

however, the means for attaining independence remained contested. The TULF continued to seek an accommodation with the government through parliamentary politics, but it constantly risked failure and popular disillusionment. Another option appeared to be offered by small groups of more militant Tamil youth who believed that only through armed force could they achieve independence.

At first, the new generation of Tamil militants harassed Tamils associated with the ruling party. In July 1975, they claimed their first successful assassination, gunning down Alfred Duraiyappa, Tamil mayor of Jaffna and president of the Jaffna SLFP branch. Soon, however, their confidence and expertise grew and they began to attack state targets, including police stations and army installations. The 1980s was to witness a dramatic intensification of armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

Rising tensions and the escalation of armed conflict

The 1977 election brought a new UNP government to power, led by J.R. Jayewardene, with a massive parliamentary majority. Indeed, so great was the UNP's electoral success in the south that the TULF formed the official parliamentary opposition, the first and only time a Tamil party has done so.

On taking office, Jayewardene had promised to provide redress for certain Tamil grievances. He soon fulfiled his pledge to abolish the district quota system for university entrance, although access to higher education remained a sensitive issue. In 1978, he sped through a second republican constitution, under which he became the country's first executive president. Under this constitution, Tamil language rights were incorporated for the first time, while a new system of proportional representation ensured minority parties a greater voice in national politics. In addition, protection of fundamental rights was enhanced, with the Supreme Court given jurisdiction over alleged violations. These initiatives did not quell the

Education policy and Tamil militancy

By 1976, the impact was being felt of new government policies on access to higher education. Under the earlier entrance system, students had been granted university places on the basis of competitive exams marked on a uniform basis throughout the island. As Jaffna Tamil students, in particular, scored well in the exams, the proportion of Tamils admitted to university was significantly higher than their proportion in the population.

After 1970, the government sought to increase access for Sinhala students by introducing an entrance system under which the number admitted in each language group was proportionate to the number who had sat the exam. The effect of this policy was that Tamil speaking students had to get higher marks for university entrance than their Sinhala-speaking counterparts, and many who would have gained entrance under the previous system were denied university education altogether.

This 'standardisation' system did not last long, however. In 1972, it was changed to a 'district quota system' to compensate for the fact that within each language constituency, certain groups had access to considerably better educational facilities. The district quota system was to benefit disadvantaged students in rural areas, particularly, whatever their ethnic group. Up-country Sinhala, Muslim and east-coast Tamil students would all benefit, but Jaffna Tamils would still have to perform better than others because of their higher overall educational attainment. This system provoked intense protest in the north, which was in turn strongly resisted by the state. The leaders of militant Tamil separatism initially emerged from the generation of Jaffna Tamil youth disadvantaged by 1970s education policies.

Jaffna public library, burnt out by Sri Lankan police in July 1981

Communal violence 1977-81

Within a month of the 1977 elections, there was a significant decline in the security of Tamil people living in the south including, for the first time, the Up-country population. In the last two weeks of August 1977, Sinhalese gangs killed over 100 Tamils. At the same time, tens of thousands were displaced, leaving their homes and property looted and burned.

In the north, the 1981 District Development Council elections were also marred by violence. The LTTE killed the leading UNP candidate in Jaffna as well as two police officers and several other people. Then, during a campaigning visit to Jaffna by two government ministers, the police went on a retaliatory rampage through the town. They killed several people, destroyed the market area, numerous homes, a Tamil newspaper office, the TULF headquarters and the public library. The library contained some 95,000 books and manuscripts and was considered a key repository of Tamil history and culture. Its destruction remains one of the landmarks in any chronology of the Sri Lankan conflict.

rising Tamil militancy, however, and it was not long before the president was extending new powers to security forces in the north, and suspending certain constitutional safeguards against human rights abuses.

In April 1978, after a Jaffna police inspector had been killed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the government hurriedly passed a new law to proscribe the militant group and 'other similar organisations'. In July 1979, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was also passed. This enactment, together with a declaration of a state of emergency in the north, marked a new, more intensive phase in security operations. Reports of human rights violations committed by the security forces increased, exacerbating resentment among Tamil civilians and fuelling growing support for the militants.

While seeking to suppress militancy through force, President Jayewardene looked to satisfy Tamil demands for greater political autonomy through an island-wide system of decentralisation under the District Development Councils

Act, passed in August 1980. While declaring the District Development Councils (DDCs) would not satisfy their demand for Eelam, the TULF participated in the presidential commission which prepared this legislation, and also in the DDC elections of July 1981. Once the DDCs were elected, however, they found themselves insufficiently funded, inadequately empowered, and subject to central government interference.

Amid heightening tension and increasing militarism on all sides, the key turning point in the conflict came in July 1983, when anti-Tamil violence in the south erupted on a scale never seen before. The violence broke out after the LTTE ambushed and killed 13 soldiers near Jaffna, the first time an attack of this scale had taken place. After the soldiers' bodies were flown to Colombo for a mass funeral, retaliatory attacks commenced against Tamils in the city, and soon spread elsewhere. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands of homes and businesses destroyed. In Welikade prison, 52 Tamil prisoners were killed on successive days by Sinhala inmates with the apparent complicity of prison staff. In the north, the security forces went on a killing spree. Despite the considerable evidence of official involvement in the violence, however, no government investigations were held.

Far from offering redress to the victims of the violence, in fact, the government sought instead to 'appease' the perpetrators, presenting the riots as a 'natural' response to armed militancy and introducing a constitutional amendment banning advocacy of secessionism, even by peaceful, political means. TULF Parliamentarians, who had been elected on a separatist platform, had to forfeit their seats. The constitutional path for Tamil nationalist aspirations was effectively blocked.

Eelam War I

After July 1983, Tamil militant recruitment increased dramatically. The various armed groups consolidated bases in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where they received the

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The 1976 Vaddukoddai Resolution (excerpt)

... 'This convention resolves that restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam, based on the right of self-determination inherent to every nation, has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil Nation in this Country.

... 'This convention calls upon the Tamil Nation in general and the Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully into the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam is reached.'

Sri Lankan Muslims and the war

In earlier years, the ideologues of Tamil militancy claimed their quest for Eelam was on behalf of all Tamil speakers, including Muslims. While generally Muslims had tried to remain neutral in the gathering strife, they inevitably became caught between the increasingly polarised Sinhala and Tamil communities, especially in the east. In recognition of this, the 1980s saw a new political party established — the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) — to articulate specific Muslim interests in Sri Lankan national affairs.

In 1985, Tamil militants killed a number of Sri Lankan Muslims in Mannar in the northwest of the island. As their security was now directly threatened, militancy increased within the Muslim community, triggering a wave of Tamil-Muslim clashes. In 1990, Muslims suffered further sustained attacks from the LTTE, including the killing of about 140 worshippers in a mosque at Kattankudy and the expulsion of all Muslims from the north. Unable to provide adequate protection in the wake of these renewed attacks, the government created a Muslim Home Guard, an armed civil defence force. This fed into the rising spiral of violence, with numerous reports of reprisal killings carried out against Muslim and Tamil civilians by the LTTE and the Home Guard respectively.

While Muslim-Tamil violence has subsided significantly in recent years, it is now clear that any settlement of the conflict will have to take into account the fears and interests of Muslims, particularly in the east. This has been recognised by the current government which relies on the support of the SLMC to maintain its parliamentary majority. Its draft constitution, published in October 1997, contains controversial provisions which might create a devolved Muslim territorial unit in the southeastern Ampara district.

support of the state government. The central Indian government also sought increasingly to influence Sri Lankan policy on the Tamil issue and its intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), provided arms and training to the militants.

The rise in Tamil militancy responded to state violence and, in turn, provoked increasingly ferocious crackdowns. Despite enhanced powers under the PTA and emergency rule, the security forces often acted outside the law altogether. Arbitrary and retaliatory killings of Tamil civilians became commonplace, and from 1984, the disappearance of young Tamil men in custody became a regular occurrence. As Tamil youths became increasingly vulnerable to gross violations by the security forces due to their ethnicity, more and more took to arms. Meanwhile, the militants, and particularly the LTTE, also launched attacks on civilian targets, sometimes killing large numbers of Sinhalese villagers.

By mid-1985, the armed militants had gained the upper hand in the Jaffna peninsula. They would brook no dissent within the Tamil community, appearing to maintain their hold through intimidation and killing. At the same time, considerable violent rivalry developed between the groups themselves. In mid-1986, the LTTE attacked members of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and after a week's fighting, the LTTE emerged as the dominant force in Tamil militant politics. Soon after, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) suffered a similar fate when scores of its cadres were killed. From that time, while continuing armed warfare against the Sri Lankan state, the LTTE did not allow other Tamil groups or political parties to operate in areas under its control.

Indian intervention

Despite its direct support to the militants, the Indian government did not share Tamil separatist objectives, not wanting to fuel separatist tendencies in Tamil Nadu and other Indian states. It wanted Tamil grievances to be

addressed through devolution within a single Sri Lankan state, but believed that strong pressure had to be applied to the Sri Lankan government to achieve this goal.

In a preliminary attempt to broker a favourable settlement, the Indian government convened the first peace talks between the warring parties in Thimpu, Bhutan. Five Tamil militant groups and the TULF were represented in a joint delegation, while both Sri Lankan and Indian government representatives also attended. The Tamil delegation articulated the principles which any agreement would have to fulfil to meet their aspirations, but there was no constructive discussion and no agreement was reached.

After a further degeneration in the war and much diplomatic manoeuvring, the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 1987 marked the culmination of India's peace efforts. Signed by the two governments, the accord appeared to address Tamil grievances to a considerable extent. Among other things, it offered a new system of devolution and gave Tamil the status of an official language. It also provided for the deployment in Sri Lanka of an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to enforce the cessation of hostilities and the surrender of arms. While none of the militant groups were signatories to the accord, the Indian government clearly believed they would comply with its implementation. The LTTE had other ideas. They soon made it clear that they considered the accord a betrayal.

The IPKF arrived in northeast Sri Lanka on 30 July 1987 but their presence proved disastrous. The force soon found itself fighting the LTTE and, while other Tamil militant groups joined their military campaign in support of the Indo-Lanka Accord, the IPKF and its allies were soon accused of the same human rights violations that once characterised the northeast operations of the Sri Lankan army.

Nevertheless, efforts continued to implement the Indo-Lanka Accord. A united Northeastern Province was created under its terms, and elections to a provincial council, held in November 1988, were won by the Indian-favoured Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). The North East Provincial Council (NEPC), however, was never granted the extent of powers it had hoped for. Meanwhile, the Indo-Lanka Accord had stirred extensive protest in the south from those who feared Indian expansionism, and fuelled a vicious insurrection within the Sinhala community.

The presidential elections of December 1988 brought a change in Sri Lankan policy towards Indian involvement. The new UNP president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, began negotiations with the LTTE in April 1989. Premadasa held common cause with the LTTE in seeking to remove the IPKF from Sri Lanka, which he believed would address a major cause of the southern insurgency. Increasingly besieged, Indian troops began to be withdrawn in September 1989, the last leaving in March 1990. As they moved out, the LTTE moved in to take control of the northeast. The North East Provincial Council was dissolved by central government and fierce fighting ensued between the LTTE and the 'Tamil National Army', recruited by the Indians and their NEPC allies. In the ensuing mêlée, thousands of members and supporters of non-LTTE Tamil groups fled to India or were killed.

With the IPKF gone, negotiations between the government and the LTTE soon broke down. In June 1990, the LTTE attacked police posts in the east, killing and capturing large numbers of officers. The Indo-Lanka Accord and the Indian government's efforts to resolve the conflict had both failed dismally. The Jaffna peninsula was under the control of the LTTE and 'Eelam War II' had begun. ■