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Sri Lanka

# Review of a history of oppression: The Tamils of Sri Lanka

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**In February 2011, the President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, celebrated the 63rd anniversary of the island's independence. In his speech, he stressed the necessity of "protecting the reconstructed nation", as well as protecting "one of the oldest democracies in Asia", its unity and its unitary character.**

This speech came nearly two years after the end of the war on 19 May 2009, between the Sri Lankan state and the "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam" (LTTE). The military command of the LTTE was decimated in the last two months of a merciless war which had led to tens of thousands of deaths since the early 1980s.

Some thirty years of civil war have transformed the Sri Lankan political landscape. Once an island characterised by a developed social policy and high development indicators, Sri Lanka is today ravaged by state violence, the militarisation of society and an authoritarian state.

The end of the war has in no way opened a period of peace and still less settled the Tamil national question. The Sri Lankan government, whose powers are concentrated in the hands of Mahinda Rajapaksa and brothers, has not sought to remedy the structural causes which led to the civil war. The state remains Sinhalese nationalist and racist in its essence and rejects any devolution of powers which would allow the different communities to envisage the future together.

The President is at war against his people. State violence is also exerted against Sinhalese, journalists and political activists who oppose him but also against workers as a whole. Despite the end of the war, the government has maintained the Prevention of Terrorism Act which allows it to muzzle its opponents. All communities suffer from the collapse of the rule of law. No peace can last if it does not rest on any political will to settle disputes.

The history of Sri Lanka is rich in lessons. It illustrates to what point attacks against minorities are the premises of more general attacks against workers whatever their ethnicity. They lead inevitably to a weakening, if not a collapse, of democracy. It is important and necessary to review the historic roots which are at the base of the formation of this specific state having led to the emergence of two antagonistic nationalisms: Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism and its reaction, Tamil nationalism.

## The germs of inter-communal dissension

Sri Lanka, Ceylon until 1972, has been profoundly marked by several centuries of colonisation. The strategic position of the island in the Indian Ocean explains its successive conquest by the Portuguese, Dutch and British.

The main communities of the island, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, originate from successive migrations from India. The first took place in the 6th century BC by migrants coming from the North West of India and practicing Buddhism [1]. They slowly melted with other groups coming from southern parts of India to form the Sinhala community [2]. This was followed around 300 years later by a smaller migration of Hindu Tamils from the south of India. The Tamil migration continued in the north of the island for several hundred years and at the end of the 12th century, the peninsula of Jaffna constituted a separate state with a culture and language different from Sinhalese.

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Neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamils can claim to be the first to have peopled the island since when they arrived, Ceylon was already occupied by a hunter gatherer people, the Veddah or Wanniyaletto, who are today almost completely assimilated in the different communities.

The different social formations which would emerge on the island were however not compartmentalised. In the kingdom of Kandy, for example, the Nayakkar dynasty emerged from the Vijayanagar Empire of southern India. Although the dynasty had been Tamil and originally Hindu, they converted themselves to Buddhism and were fervent promoters of it.

Under Portuguese and then Dutch colonialism, the coastal regions of the island were integrated into world trade in agricultural products from the early 16th century, facilitating the rise of a merchant capitalism. The coastal population was in its majority Sinhalese and Buddhist but trade exchanges made it a place of interconnection where Arabs, Sinhalese, Tamils and Burghers mingled [3].

In the peninsula of the North, which was poorer, only the missionaries ventured, converting a minority of the population, previously mainly Hindu, to Christianity. Social relations of a feudal type, in particular a rigid caste system, persisted.

Upon their arrival at the end of the 18th century the British extended foreign domination to the interior of the island in the kingdom of Kandy. They developed big plantations there, imposing a new mode of production, plantation capitalism. They grabbed the communal lands previously devoted to pasturing of herds and the forests where the peasants practiced slash and burn cultivation, characterising them as “waste lands” to better resell them at a derisory price to British colonists. They would develop infrastructures which would allow the direction of the products of the plantations onto the world market.

Even if it only partially destroyed the pre-capitalist modes of production, plantation capitalism imposed itself rapidly, coming to dominate the island's economy from the beginning of the 20th century.

The dominant classes of the pre-existing formations became almost naturally the comprador bourgeoisie [4]. Whether of Sinhalese, Burgher, Muslim [5] or Tamil origin, they found a common interest with the nascent bourgeoisie of the planters. Imbued with the colonial culture, they would send their children to study at Oxford and Cambridge, so as to ensure a place alongside the colonial aristocracy.

Numerous members of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie owned their own coconut, coffee or rubber plantations. Thus, unlike neighbouring India, in Ceylon a national bourgeoisie fighting for independence did not emerge. The latter did not play a motor role in the first movements of agitation against the colonial power at the end of the 19th century. Opposition first took the form of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim religious movements who fought against the privileges of the Christian minority (made up of both Sinhalese and Tamils) and against Western culture.

The British colonial power, which feared a coming together of the interests of the Tamil and Sinhalese bourgeoisies, played upon division to the hilt. Specific and community-based interests became paramount. The Tamil elites demanded favourable treatment in exchange for their loyal service in the colonial administration. For their part, the Sinhalese built networks of communal associations, the Mahajana Sabha, resting on the rural Sinhalese elites – ayurvedic physicians, Buddhist monks, schoolmasters and so on.

The Ceylonese workers' movement emerged at the same time as plantation capitalism. The Ceylonese workers were mainly Sinhalese peasants expelled from their ancestral collective lands by the colonial power to work in the construction of roads and railways and in the docks. They maintained a toehold in the rural world however.

Meanwhile, to ensure work was carried out on the plantations and in the towns, the British colonist had called on Indian Tamil workers from Tamil Nadu who they kept apart from the local workers. The workers' movement was thus divided from its birth.

Although there were in the early 20th century several workers' struggles involving workers of all origins and confessions, the nationalist and xenophobic discourse of the Sinhalese nationalist leaders had a profound impact on the working class of Sinhalese origin.

In the 1920s, new workers' struggles allowed the development of an urban working class which was more unified, defending its own class interests beyond the castes which had survived and community based identities. A trade union confederation and a political party modelled on the British Labour Party emerged under the leadership of A.E. Goonesinha. The political control he exerted, both on the party and the trade union, was however fatal to the workers' movement. During the great depression of the 1930s, Goonesinha did not hesitate to brand the Tamil plantation workers as being responsible for high unemployment and to accuse Indian merchants of dispossessing small Ceylonese landowners. The use of Sinhalese chauvinism was an easy and rapid means of constituting an electoral base which allowed him to win the parliamentary elections in the Sinhalese constituency of central Colombo. This was a fatal blow to universal suffrage - which had just been granted in 1931- by an unscrupulous politician who deployed it to electoralist ends.

## The constitution of a Sinhalese nationalism

Nationalist and racist themes were subsequently regularly used by the ruling politicians for electoral ends or to implement a class policy. Thus, the first law adopted by the first independent Ceylonese government [6], the Citizenship Act, rendered stateless the Tamil "Indian" workers who had been settled for three or four generations in the island, under the pretext that they could not prove that they were Ceylonese by parentage or by naturalisation. The second law withdrew the right to vote under the pretext that they were not Ceylonese!

These laws took the vote away from all the plantation workers of the centre and south, or a tenth of the electoral body. That allowed the ruling UNP to eliminate a million votes, much of which have previously gone to the Left parties and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the main Ceylonese workers' party. [7]

This positioning prefigured the capitulations to come. The working class base of the party shrunk under the pressure of the inter-communal conflicts and the electoral successes of the SLFP destabilised the leadership of the LSSP. Defeat in the elections of 1960 disoriented the party. N. M. Perera, the main organiser of the LSSP's mass work, proposed forming a coalition government with the SLFP which was rejected by the majority of the party, but the LSSP parliamentary group supported the vote of confidence in the newly elected government against the "main enemy" of the UNP which had continuously ruled Ceylan since 1948 [8]. In 1964, Perera engaged the majority of the party in a coalition government with the SLFP and the Ceylon Communist Party [9], the government being led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the widow of the prime minister assassinated seven years earlier. The earlier political demands of the two left parties in favour of equal rights for the plantation Tamils and parity of status between Sinhalese and Tamil languages were put aside. In the same year, the LSSP was expelled from the Fourth International which saw entry into the SLFP government as a political treason.

A minority group around Bala Tampoe and Edmund Samarakkody continued to defend the traditional positions of the LSSP in a new party. But the only mass political party which had defended workers regardless of their ethnic origin had betrayed, leaving a political vacuum in the working class and strengthening Sinhalese nationalism. [10]

In 1968, the SLFP, LSSP and CP formed the United Front which won the 1970 elections. The LSSP and CP, definitively converted to parliamentarism, justified this alliance by the desire to oppose the UNP, "the party of foreign and Ceylonese capitalist interests" whereas the United Front campaigned for a policy of industrialisation through import substitution, the development of social protection and the nationalisation of the Bank of Ceylon, transport and the tea plantations.

The policy of this government was however less progressive than it appeared. It was Sirimavo Bandaranaike who pushed further the political logic of discrimination against North-Eastern origin and plantation Tamils to satisfy her electoral clientele. That had significant repercussions on the economic policy pursued. In a difficult economic conjuncture owing to the first generalised world recession in 1974-75, with an unprecedented increase in unemployment, the UF government sharpened discriminatory policies which were already in place and invented new ones: the "Sinhala Only Act" was used to exclude Tamils from the police, army, courts and governmental services in general; the policy of colonisation of Tamil areas was accentuated; the plantation Tamils were voluntarily or forcibly repatriated to Tamil Nadu. Standardisation of access to universities, which was deeply discriminatory against part of the Tamil community, was imposed. This racist policy was implemented by parties who identified themselves with the workers' movement. How could the coming generations of young Tamils still have confidence in the Left parties?

All these discriminatory policies had the goal of transferring resources to the Sinhalese to the detriment of the Tamils. In 1971, however, the government faced a very significant insurrection from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a group made up of young Sinhalese living in the south of the country, mainly rural and members of the petty bourgeoisie. Such an uprising of youth, supposedly the main beneficiaries of the political measures taken, show how much the discrimination against the Tamils did not benefit the majority of Sinhalese and did not alleviate poverty and unemployment. The ruling coalition responded with a terrible repression. Several thousand youths were killed by the army and the police and more than 10,000 were jailed [\[11\]](#)

## The emergence of the Tamil national question

In the early 1970s, the crisis in relation to the Tamil minority deepened. In 1972, Colvin R. De Silva, the former historic leader of the LSSP and then minister for constitutional affairs, drew up a new constitution which, among other things, gave Sinhalese the status of sole official language, established Buddhism as virtually the state religion. It removed section 29 of the 1947 Soulbury Constitution that guaranteed certain protection clauses for ethnic and religious minorities. It also introduced a new fundamental rights chapter that was applicable to North-eastern Tamils but not to those plantation Tamils who were stateless because it only protected citizens.

At the economic level, the policy of the government was profoundly discriminatory with respect to the Tamil community. The nationalisation of the plantations was accompanied by a redistribution of land in favour of the Sinhalese majority. The linguistic policy of the government deprived young Tamils of jobs after their studies. The new standards of access to the university were perceived by middle class youth as one discriminatory measure too far with respect to their community. This measure mainly affected the young Tamils of Jaffna, who were more educated. It did not affect the youth of the East, from Vanni and the plantations of the centre who for the most part did not go to university. It was nonetheless the detonator for big mobilisations and the entry into politics of a new generation of Tamil youths.

The Federal Party and the Tamil United Front (TUF) [\[12\]](#) began to distil a nationalist rhetoric which proclaimed the unity of all Tamils beyond class and caste inequalities. At this time, the notion of Tamil identity was real but it was not the substance of the Tamil community. In everyday life, belonging to a caste and a village constituted the main vectors of identity and dominated social relations.

The battles of the FP and TUF did not go outside of parliament, leaving a vacuum occupied by these young Tamil militants in Jaffna. Since independence, the attempts at political negotiations with the different parliamentary parties (SLFP and UNP) and the campaigns of Satyagraha [13] of the Federal Party had brought no solution to the Tamil cause. The refusal of the state to accord a minimum of autonomy and devolution led these young militants to reject the policy followed by the traditional Tamil political parties.

The young Tamil generations no longer believed in the possibility of developing their rights by democratic means. Only a separate state seemed to them to guarantee their linguistic, religious and cultural rights. Thus the question of a separate Tamil state emerged as the sole alternative and the means of winning it could rest neither on parliamentary battles or traditional campaign of agitation.

A major event marked the beginning of a cycle of violence [14]. In January 1974, a literary meeting to celebrate Tamil language and culture was organised in Jaffna. It was supported by the TUF. The coalition government led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike did not like it but did not dare to oppose it directly. When a final meeting attracted nearly 50,000 participants, the riot police attacked the crowd leading to the death of seven people. Following this event, the TUF and FP accentuated a campaign against the mayor of Jaffna [15], launched from 1972, accusing him of being a "traitor". These vicious attacks ended with him being assassinated on July 27, 1975 by a member of an organisation formed in 1974, the Tamil New Tigers. This new organisation changed its name to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1976.

No less than thirty groups engaged in violent actions of which the assassination of the mayor of Jaffna was the symbolic beginning. Among these groups, some like the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) were left-wing organisations. The LTTE for its part was situated on a nationalist and pragmatic terrain. But they were above all fashioned by the origin of most of the founder members, educated young students from the Jaffna middle class and rather high caste.

Ethnic tensions worsened throughout the 1970s but the armed Tamil groups remained marginal until the mid 1980s. In July 1983 a second major rupture took place. Following an ambush in which 13 police officers were killed by the Tigers, Sinhalese nationalists unleashed a pogrom in Colombo and its surrounding areas. Several thousand Tamils were killed, houses burned, shops looted. That led to a significant wave of immigration of Tamils to the north of the island and abroad. Following this tragic event thousands of young Tamils joined the armed struggle and the guerrilla struggle turned into civil war.

No progressive organisation was in a position to offer a political alternative. Sri Lankan democracy had been profoundly sapped for too long a time. In 1977, Junius Richard Jayawardene, elected Prime Minister following the victory of the UNP against the United Front, again changed the constitution, concentrating powers in the hands of a super President. He had created the National Union of Workers (Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya – JSS), in fact an organisation of hooligans used to intimidate, indeed kill his opponents, break strikes, and attack Tamils. The Sri Lankan working class was more than ever divided according to ethnic lines. The main left parties, the LSSP and the CP, had been contributors to this situation having for a long time renounced their convictions and political principles in exchange for ministerial posts. Everything was in place for a civil war which would lead to new massacres and precipitate the retreat of the workers movement as a whole especially after the defeat of the July 1980 strike movement.

## The 1980s and the domination of the LTTE

On the other said of the Palk Strait, India was not indifferent to the pressure exerted by the 50 million Tamils living in

Tamil Nadu and sympathising with the Lankan Tamil cause. During the 1980s, certain Tamil groups were militarily trained, armed and financial supported by the Indian state's intelligence arm, the Research and Analysis Wing – (RAW).

Following the Indo-Lanka accords of 1987, India intervened directly in the north of the island. It deployed a “peacekeeping force”. The agreements, signed in July 1987 by the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayawardene, sought to establish a certain autonomy in the North and East where Tamils were in the majority, the fusion of its two provinces (fusion which should be validated by a referendum) and the recognition of an equal status between the Tamil and Sinhalese languages.

But despite a common reference to the Thimphu Declaration [16] which aimed to present a unified and common basis for the many Tamil groups, the political divisions and personal antagonisms remained. Among them, the LTTE would emerge as the dominant group. From the early 1980s, the Tigers organised the brutal killing of the main leaders of the other armed Tamil groups, in particular those organisations identified with Left and therefore mass-based politics

Moderate Tamil activists, pro-Indian activists, and democrats not supporting the objective of a separate Tamil state were forced into exile or killed. The TULF was considerably weakened politically by the LTTE's assassination of its main leaders, A. Amirthalingham and Yogeswaran. By eliminating or forcing into exile the main leaders of the other organisations of struggle, the LTTE destroyed all democracy inside the Tamil national liberation movement. They did not seek to unite the different Tamil-speaking communities of Sri Lanka. On the contrary, in 1990, they were guilty of ethnic cleansing, notably by the expulsion of almost 100,000 Tamil speaking Muslims from Jaffna district in the space of 48 hours. In a certain way, the LTTE shared with the Colombo government that they fought the same criminal conception of an ethnically pure society, rid of every minority.

In the early 1990s, the Tigers no longer had any real opposition. They could then present themselves as the “sole legitimate representatives of the Tamil people” and seek external political support. Their objective of a separate Tamil state became the sole proclaimed objective, separating it from the question of the rights demanded by Tamils and mortgaging any democratic resolution of the civil war.

## Some lessons from the history of an oppression

This historic recapitulation of the Tamil question in Sri Lanka allows us to draw valid political lessons for other continents and other struggles which give it a universal scope.

The organisations of the workers' movement should never abandon a part of their own. One cannot claim to emancipate the workers from exploitation while allowing a minority among them to become the victims of vindictive racism, indeed worse, directly participating in their oppression. Discrimination and violence exerted against an ethnic minority will return later against the workers as a whole and their organisations. Sri Lanka is the sad illustration of it. The Sinhalese workers have gained nothing from the oppression of the Tamils and the LSSP and CP, in allowing them to fall, precipitated their degeneration.

So far as the Tamil Tigers are concerned, full scale militarisation and maximalism were fed by the negation of the democratic rights of the Tamils themselves and thus the possibility of self-organising struggles. No socialist and democratic society can be created by organisations which justify murder in the name of the necessities of the armed struggle.

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In all fights against national oppression, or against the oppression suffered by certain ethnic groups, there is the need to recognize the right to self-determination. The only progressive solution is the defence of equality between citizens, whatever their origin, sex or religion. Today the material and political conditions for the exercise of self-determination rights do not exist. Since Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, its minorities should be granted rights including political, cultural and linguistic rights, to reverse historical oppression or discrimination.

Today, there is an urgent need to address justice and reparations for the Tamils and Muslims who were displaced and dispossessed during the war and for the Hill-country Tamils who are still economically disenfranchised. Rather than so doing, the current government of Sri Lanka has profited from the military "victory" over the Tamil Tigers in 2009 to restrict still further democratic liberties, block any opposition and on this basis attack all workers whatever their ethnic origin. The new trend in economic development further causes uneven development and inequality for the majority of the Sri Lankan people. Therefore, there will not be any progress toward social justice and democracy without linking the political settlement of minorities' demands with the class struggle of all workers for social justice and redistribution. In that perspective, devolution of state power could be an important step to empowering local communities and minorities against this authoritarian and centered State.

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[1] Buddhism, which emerged in the 6th century BC in India, was originally an interpretation of Hinduism based on tolerance and moderation. Its main divergence with Hinduism rests on the rejection of the caste system. Ceylon is the only place where Buddhism developed by maintaining the caste system

[2] See, Meyer Eric Paul (2009). The Specificity of Sri Lanka: Towards a Comparative History of Sri Lanka and India. Economic and Political Weekly

[3] Descendants of mixed marriages between Dutch or Portuguese and Ceylonese

[4] The word "comprador" designates a bourgeoisie in a developing country drawing its wealth from foreign trade rather than a bourgeoisie having interests in the production of national wealth

[5] In Sri Lanka, Muslim identity does not rest only on religion but has developed as a specific ethnic identity. Although most Muslims speak Tamil, they do not consider themselves as "Tamil Muslims" but as Tamil-speaking Muslims

[6] The first independent government in 1948 was led by D.S. Senanayake and his party the United National Party (UNP). The UNP was the party representing the interests of the comprador bourgeoisie. It won power at independence without ever having led the struggle against British imperialism

[7] For more details on the LSSP refer to Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: The long march of the Trotskyists* published by Ink Links, London, 1979, pp 112-117. Ervin, Charles Wesley. <<http://www.revolutionprotestencyclo...>> <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article14491>">"Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Sri Lankan radicalism,".

[8] The Fourth International publicly disavowed this vote as well as the budget vote the same year

[9] The Ceylon Communist Party was formed in 1943 after the expulsion of the Stalinist current of the LSSP in 1940. This current refused to lead the struggle against colonialism because of the alliance between the USSR and British imperialism during the war

[10] Up to 1985, the RMP (Revolutionary Marxist Party), led by Bala Tampoe, was recognized as the Sri Lankan section of the FI. Another prominent RMP leader was Upali Cooray. Following a division in this organisation in 1981 there was not de facto a functioning section until 1991 when the World Congress recognised the Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya, although Bala Tampoe and the comrades around him continued as individual members.



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The origins of the NSSP are in a Left or "Vama" tendency that emerged inside the post-1964 LSSP. This tendency, leaders of which were expelled by the LSSP in the early 1970s, developed around students and lecturers in Peradeniya University then broadened to include working class members of the LSSP as well as more radical older leaders of the LSSP. The Vama tendency became an open organisation in 1977, after several years of maintaining an inside/outside relationship with the LSSP and took the name of Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya (New Socialist (or Social Equality) Party). The NSSP was banned in 1983 after the July pogroms and only legalised again in 1985. Some of its leaders and members were killed by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) during the 1987-1990 insurrection and also by the LTTE in the same period. The NSSP is one of the few parties that has consistently defended the right to self-determination for the Tamil people.

The Vama tendency had come into contact with the Militant Tendency (Ted Grant) through its supporters who went to Britain to study. They became affiliated with the Militant international current but developed ideological differences as well as strategic differences on Sri Lanka. The NSSP broke with the Militant tendency in 1988-89 and developed relations with the Fourth International.

[11] The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna was a revolutionary movement but since its beginning it had xenophobic tendencies, regarding Hill-Country Tamil workers saw as fifth-columnists for India expansionism. It became an unbridled Sinhala chauvinist Party. [[For more on JVP see Skanthakumar, Balasingham. "[People's Liberation Front of Sri Lanka \(JVP\)](#)" in The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, Ness, Immanuel (Ed), Blackwell Publishing, 2009. Blackwell Reference Online. 07 May 2009.

[12] Coalition formed in 1972 comprising several Tamil parties including the Tamil Congress (ACTC) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and which became the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976 after the Federal Party had joined the coalition

[13] Peaceful mobilisations of the type advocated by Mahatma Gandhi

[14] On this subject see UTHR (J) – [Chapter 2](#).

[15] He was elected as an independent but supported the SLFP

[16] On July 13, 1985, the different Tamil groups, meeting in the capital of Bhutan Thimphu, agreed on three key points: recognition of a distinct Tamil nation and its right to self-determination, the guarantee of the territorial integrity of an independent Tamil state, the safeguarding of the fundamental rights of Tamils outside of their state