

Political Dimensions of the Crisis in Sri Lanka

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Let me start with a childhood memory. My father was Tamil, my mother was Burgher - that's what they call people with European ancestry in Sri Lanka - and we were living in a predominantly Sinhalese neighborhood just outside Colombo. One day in May 1958 our Sinhalese neighbor Menike, who was like a member of our family, came over in great distress, insisting that we leave our home at once and go somewhere safe because a bloodthirsty mob was heading our way. At around the same time my mother's former student Yasmine, who had become a family friend, also Sinhalese, came over in a car, offering to shelter us at her parents' place. My mother had been for a walk so my parents knew that Tamils were being attacked, but at that point they refused to leave. They packed off my brother and me and our Tamil grandmother in a taxi with another Sinhalese neighbor to stay with our burgher grandmother, and started making Molotov cocktails to defend themselves and their home. By this time Menike was frantic and threatened to commit suicide unless they left. They finally agreed, and yet another Sinhalese neighbor drove them in his car to Yasmine's parents' place.

Thirty years later, when I was doing research on Sri Lankan refugees and internally displaced people, I came across numerous similar stories in which Tamils had been saved by Sinhalese friends, neighbors, colleagues, or even total strangers. To me these stories encapsulate the divided soul of Sri Lanka: hatred and violence on one side, love and compassion on the other, racism on one side, anti-racism on the other, brutal authoritarianism on one side, a stubborn pursuit of democracy and human rights on the other.

The divisions were already present at Independence in 1948, when J.R. Jayawardene, leader of the United National Party or UNP, and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who later became leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party or SLFP, agreed on one thing: depriving around a million Tamils of more recent Indian origin, most of whom were plantation workers in the central Hill Country, of their franchise and citizenship. The exercise was carried out in a patently discriminatory manner by demanding that these poverty-stricken and super-exploited workers provide documentary proof of

Sri Lankan ancestry, which the vast majority of Sinhalese citizens would not have been able to provide. During the parliamentary debates on these bills, the left parties – the larger Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party or LSSP and the smaller Communist Party of Ceylon (now the Communist Party of Sri Lanka or CPSL) – argued vehemently against them, denouncing them as racist, anti-democratic, and an attack on workers' rights. The strength of the left and the labor movement in this early period can be gauged from the success of the "hartal" or nationwide general strike they launched in 1953, when the UNP government tried to abolish the highly-subsidized rice ration on the advice of the World Bank.

In 1956, Bandaranaike and his SLFP came to power on the promise of making Sinhala the only official language. The Official Language or Sinhala Only Act, as it came to be called, discriminated against Tamil-speaking people in government employment, and peaceful protests were launched against it. On this occasion too, the main left parties opposed the bill, although a breakaway section of the LSSP supported it. In 1957, responding to the protests, Bandaranaike signed the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact, recognizing Tamil as the language of a national minority and of administration in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. But a year later, in response to militant agitation by right-wing Buddhist monks, he renounced the Pact, leading to a campaign by Tamils in Jaffna blacking out the Sinhala letter *sri*, which had been substituted for English letters on their license plates. This was what sparked the 1958 anti-Tamil riots in Colombo and elsewhere. As the violence threatened to rage out of control, Bandaranaike handed over authority to the Governor General, who declared an Emergency and clamped down on the mobs. Angry with Bandaranaike for not going far enough, an extreme right-wing Buddhist monk organization, the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna, assassinated him in 1959. His widow, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, became leader of the SLFP, which was elected to power in 1960. In 1964 she negotiated an agreement with Indian Prime Minister Shastri to deport over half a million Tamil plantation workers to India.

In 1964, the LSSP and CP entered into an alliance with the SLFP, and in 1968 formed a United Front with it which came to power in 1970. I feel this was an unmitigated disaster. The left disintegrated as principled members of the parties broke away and then split again, and the LSSP was expelled from the Fourth International. There were no major anti-Tamil pogroms under Mrs. Bandaranaike, but discrimination continued. In 1970 the United Front government introduced a university entrance system that discriminated against Tamils, creating a group of frustrated and embittered Tamil youths. Paradoxically, in 1971 there was an anti-government uprising led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or JVP, which combined Sinhala nationalism with an authoritarian brand of socialism and drew its membership and support precisely from those sections of the population who should have benefited from Sinhala Only. The uprising was crushed with at least 5,000 people killed. The depth of their dissatisfaction should have alerted the government to the fact that anti-Tamil discrimination was not solving the problems of unemployment and poverty among the Sinhalese, but the anti-Tamil policies continued. In the name of nationalizing the plantations, plantation land was distributed to Sinhalese government supporters under the Land Reform Laws of 1972 and 1975. Tamil plantation workers and their families were assaulted and driven out, their dwellings looted and burned; some were killed, and others were left to starve.

In 1972, a Republican Constitution was enacted. Ironically, the same Colvin R. de Silva of the LSSP who had in 1958 warned that Sinhala Only would result in "two torn little bleeding states," now presided over the drafting of a constitution which entrenched Sinhala as the sole official language, provided a special status to Buddhism, and omitted the protection of minority rights. The 1972 constitution also omitted the second chamber of Parliament, the independent Public Service Commission to guarantee impartiality in public service appointments and the Judicial Service Commission, which was intended to guarantee the independence and integrity of the judiciary. Judicial review of legislation was also prohibited. Thus, in addition to further depriving minorities of

their rights, the 1972 constitution centralized power in a manner that could be used against the Sinhalese majority.

After the UNP headed by J.R. Jayawardene won the elections in 1977, he enacted a new constitution in 1978, further centralizing almost unlimited power in the hands of the Executive President – himself. Freedom of expression and other democratic rights were crushed. He set up the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya or JSS, supposedly a union but more like a government-controlled paramilitary force. JSS gangs were used to intimidate and kill opposition supporters and judges who gave verdicts against UNP criminals. They were used repeatedly against workers and trade unions to break strikes, assault and kill trade unionists, and get members of existing unions dismissed. It was obvious that the JSS had protection from the very top because the police never acted against them, whereas around 80,000 public employees who opposed them and went on strike lost their jobs.

Starting just a month after the UNP took office, the JSS was used to assault and kill Tamils, loot and burn their shops and homes, and drive them out of the areas where they lived. In 1979, the Prevention of Terrorism Act and provisions of the Public Security Act were used as a cover for the torture, disappearance, and killing of thousands of Tamils by the state. Then in May 1981, violence broke out in Jaffna, and the targets of widespread arson attacks included the Jaffna Public Library, with its 95,000 volumes and priceless manuscripts. This was followed by island-wide pogroms against Tamils, which were only over-shadowed by the even more gruesome massacres of 1983, which left thousands of Tamils dead and turned a simmering conflict into a civil war between the Sinhalese state and Tamil nationalist militias fighting for a separate Tamil state. The most ruthless and powerful of these, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE, became dominant by slaughtering its rivals. Tamil socialists were demoralized. Some drifted into Tamil nationalist parties and militant groups, while others were killed or driven into exile by the LTTE.

The fighting in the North and East halted temporarily after Jayawardene signed an accord with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1987 granting Tamil the status of an official language and providing for limited devolution of power to the provinces. Fighting shifted to the rest of the country as the JVP launched its second insurrection. Many of its former members who disagreed with its chauvinism and authoritarianism had left, and those who remained were hardliners whose response to anyone who opposed them inside or outside the organization was invariably violent. The state, controlled by the UNP, responded with indiscriminate slaughter of Sinhalese youth. This is what resulted in the gruesome atrocities and massive death toll (estimated at 40,000-60,000) during the second JVP insurgency, which ended in November 1989. On the pretext of fighting the JVP, government death squads killed unarmed critics, political rivals, and even dissidents within the UNP, and this repression went on after the JVP was defeated. In 1990, fighting between the state and the LTTE broke out again. Ranil Wickremasinghe, the current leader of the UNP, was a senior member of the government throughout this period, and therefore shares responsibility for the mass murder of both Sinhalese and Tamils, most of them unarmed civilians.

What we see here is the trajectory that has led to the political crisis in 2022. On one side, working people have been divided and weakened again and again, on the other side power has been centralized more and more, allowing the Executive President leeway to appoint cronies to key posts and destroy the economy. The struggle over the Constitution is crucial from this point of view, and it has had a roller-coaster ride, partly because courts have held that changing crucial elements of it like abolishing the Executive Presidency itself requires a two-thirds majority in parliament as well as a simple majority in a referendum. When Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected president in 1994 on the promise of ending the war and abolishing the Executive Presidency, democratic rights were mostly restored in the parts of the country under government control. But the LTTE sabotaged her efforts to end the war by assassinating two Tamil politicians engaged in crafting a constitution that would devolve significant authority to the North and East and trying to assassinate her too. Nor did

she succeed in abolishing the Executive Presidency. But the 17th Amendment to the constitution was passed, taking away the power of the president to unilaterally appoint people to institutions that ought to be independent, like the Election Commission and the Supreme Court.

In 2005, Kumaratunga was succeeded as president by Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was then in the SLFP. Human rights violations against Tamils, which had declined under Kumaratunga, increased sharply. In the South, freedom of expression came under severe attack, and death squads targeting critics of the government resurfaced. Among the many victims, perhaps the most famous are Lasantha Wickrematunge and Prageeth Ekneligoda. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was Defense Secretary at that time, not only controlled the armed forces and multiple intelligence agencies, but also higher education and urban development. As the war moved towards its terrible end in 2009, the UN estimated that around 40,000 civilians were killed, partly because the LTTE used them as human shields but also because the Defense Secretary directed government forces to bomb and shell civilian targets, including hospitals and safe zones.

The presidential election of January 2010 in which Mahinda Rajapaksa came back to power was marked by massive irregularities. He used state resources to support his own campaign and vilify his opponent, assault and kill journalists who failed to fall in line, attack opposition rallies, and rig the vote so blatantly that the election commissioner admitted he was unable to guarantee the safety of even a single ballot box. His coalition won the subsequent parliamentary elections, and one of his first priorities was to pass the 18th Amendment that reversed the reforms introduced by the 17th Amendment, allowing him to appoint his family members and cronies to key ministries and all supposedly independent institutions. It also abolished the two-term limit on the presidency. With the LTTE defeated, a new enemy was found to rally the Sinhalese masses behind the Rajapaksas: Muslims. State-sponsored far-right Buddhist monk groups sprang up, driving Muslims from their homes and businesses with arson and murder.

When the presidential election of 2015 was announced, with Mahinda Rajapaksa standing again, it should be obvious why voters from ethnic minorities would oppose him and vote for the United National Front for Good Governance or Yahapalanaya alliance between an SLFP rebel, Maithripala Sirisena, and Ranil Wickremesinghe of the UNP. But minorities alone would not have been able to defeat Rajapaksa. It was widespread disgust among a substantial section of Sinhalese voters with the scandalous nepotism and corruption of the Rajapaksas that tipped the balance against them, along with courageous campaigning and monitoring of the election by democracy activists. Leaders of the LSSP, CPSL and Democratic Left Front or DLF continued to support the Rajapaksas, expelling members who disagreed with that policy. They remain in the same position to this day, and therefore share responsibility for the current catastrophe.

Why did these self-professed left leaders betray socialist principles in this way? There seem to be three reasons. One is their belief that nationalization as such is a socialist measure, regardless of the character of the state that is carrying it out. For example, nationalization of the plantations by a Sinhala supremacist state had a devastating impact on Tamil plantation workers, but they didn't care, despite having fought for the rights of plantation workers in an earlier incarnation. The second reason is their disdain for democracy, which they see as connected to capitalism and the bourgeoisie, whereas I see it as the product of struggles by working people and an essential precondition for a socialist movement. Finally, there is their support for any party that is friendly with the regime in China and rejects what is seen as "the West," including proposals for any investigation into war crimes by the UN Human Rights Council. They are not alone in taking such positions: a section of the global left takes similar positions in support of brutal authoritarian and even imperialist regimes so long as they are seen as opposed to the West.

Sirisena was elected president in January. Wickremasinghe was appointed as temporary PM, and

after the parliamentary elections in August, he became the PM in the new government. There were some improvements. The Executive Presidency was not abolished, but the 19th Amendment severely curtailed the powers of the president. The revival of freedom of expression allowed long-suppressed grievances to be voiced in public without fear of reprisal, and the Right to Information Act introduced transparency in governance. Some of the land occupied by the army was returned to its Tamil owners, and there was an attempt to protect Muslims from mob violence. Investigations into the crimes of the previous regime also began. But problems soon surfaced. Wickremasinghe's neoliberal policies were unpopular, and a bond scam in which his protégé was involved sullied the image of the government. He was also accused of holding back on prosecuting major crimes by Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his son despite adequate evidence being available – accusations that gained new credibility recently when Gotabaya chose him as the new Prime Minister despite the fact that Wickremasinghe lost his seat in the general elections and the UNP got a pathetic 249,435 votes out of over 16 million. On the other side, Sirisena too started drifting back to the Rajapaksa camp, now headed by their new party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna or SLPP, and acting as their agent. The final blow to the Yahapalanaya government was the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019, which killed over 250 people and allowed Gotabaya to campaign in the presidential election on a plank of “national security.” Yet it emerged soon afterwards that the mastermind of the terror attacks Mohamed Zahran and his associates, who had pledged support to Daesh, were being protected and bankrolled by the Rajapaksas themselves through their contacts in the deep state, while Sirisena and Wickremasinghe looked the other way!

Given this dreadful morass, the 2022 crisis is as much political as economic. For me, the greatest cause for optimism is the participation in political activism of women and young people in large numbers as well as the emerging unity between people of all communities. The sight of Sinhalese and Tamil people celebrating New Year together and joining with Muslims in ifthar parties when they break their fast is heart-warming, but this new friendship could easily melt away. Activists need to spread the message that tolerating the oppression of some members of society leads to divisions that make it easy to attack the rights of all. It won't be easy, but it's not impossible. As I mentioned earlier, I came across numerous stories of life-saving solidarity during the war. I also came across prejudice, especially among Sinhalese displaced people, but it's important to set this in the context of profound ignorance resulting from the language divide created by Sinhala Only, the silencing of dissident voices, and relentless disinformation in the Sinhala media.

When I was conducting a workshop for garment workers, all of whom were young Sinhalese women, a workshop for young Tamil women displaced from the North by the war was going on in the same conference center, and during mealtimes the Sinhalese women went over to talk to the Tamil women, finding bilingual interpreters to help them to communicate. There was curiosity as well as sympathy for women suffering a different form of oppression from what they themselves suffered. And when I interviewed Sinhalese women whose family members had been killed in the JVP counter-insurgency – an episode that gets far too little attention both in Sri Lanka and internationally – one of the sentiments they expressed was, “If the army can do this to *us*, what must they have been doing to Tamils?” The shared trauma between all three communities of displacement, disappearances, and mass killings can be one source of solidarity, provided that it is communicated effectively.

But on the other side of the equation, tackling the huge concentration of power in the hands of a brutal dictator without allowing the situation to descend into violence and chaos is more challenging. The Bar Association of Sri Lanka or BASL has proposed a roadmap that includes, among other things, the creation of an interim government which introduces the 21st Amendment repealing the 20th Amendment and plugging the loopholes of the 19th; abolishes the Executive Presidency within 15 months; dissolves parliament within 18 months; and acts as a caretaker government for a

further 6 weeks in order to hold fresh parliamentary elections.

The first step – appointing an interim government that will carry out this agenda – is in some ways the most critical. It will require sustained pressure from the democracy movement and possibly an indefinite strike until it is accomplished. But it also needs MPs to lead the effort in parliament. Who could these be? The Samagi Jana Balavegaya, led by Sajith Premadasa, is by far the largest opposition party and has apparently agreed to the BASL proposals. The Tamil National Alliance is the next largest, and has played a progressive role in parliament. It should be part of an interim government along with other minority parties which have opposed the Rajapaksas, but they will have to resist being bamboozled or coerced into joining a government appointed by Gotabaya. The JVP is the third largest and has played a progressive role in the struggle for democracy, but its leader, Anura Kumara Disanayake, will have to understand that forming an alliance with the SJB is necessary in order to move forward. The opposition parties need to enter into urgent negotiations on how to proceed, taking the advice of advocates of economic and social justice as well as democracy and human rights activists.

As for the SLPP and parties which have been allied to it, including the SLFP and the Tamil, Muslim and Left parties, they are jointly responsible for the current catastrophe. In a longer-term sense, so are Ranil Wickremesinghe and the UNP. They all belong in the dustbin of history.

Guide to Sri Lankan Parties and Organizations

Party or Organization Name	Abbr.	Key Leaders	Years in power	Political orientation
United National Party	UNP	D.S.Senanayake, Dudley Senanayake, John Kotalawala, J.R. Jayawardene, Ranasinghe Premadasa, Ranil Wickremesinghe	1948-1956, 1960, 1965-1970, 1977-1994, 2001-2005 (as PM with an SLFP president), 2015-2019 (as PM with an SLFP president)	Centre-right economically and politically, neoliberal and extremely authoritarian after J.R. Jayawardene took over in 1977. Has used Sinhala nationalism to gain and retain power.
Sri Lankan Freedom Party	SLFP	S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike; widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike after husband's assassination 1959; Chandrika Kumaratunga (1994-2005); Mahinda Rajapaksa. Maithripala Sirisena was rebel from party	1956-1960, 1970-1977, 1994-2001 as both PM and President, 2001-2005 as President with a UNP PM, 2005-2015, 2015-2019 Sirisena was president with Wickremesinghe as PM	Sinhala nationalist except under Chandrika Kumaratunga's leadership, in favor of nationalization of banks etc. and a welfare state. Extremely authoritarian after Mahinda Rajapaksa took over in 2005, ended the civil war with great brutality in 2009.

Lanka Sama Samaja Party	LSSP	Leslie Goonawardene N.M. Perera, Colvin R. de Silva, Philip Gunawardena, Robert Gunawardena. Currently Tissa Vitharana.	Part of United Front 1970-1977. Joined the People's Alliance government led by Chandrika Kumaratunga 1994-2000.	Trotskyist member of the Fourth International until expelled for alliance with SLFP; originally the largest left party but has splintered; supported the Rajapaksas.
Communist Party of Sri Lanka (formerly Communist Party of Ceylon)	CPSL	S.A Wickramasinghe, D.E.W. Gunasekara. Currently G. Weerasinghe.	part of United Front 1970-1977. Joined the People's Alliance government led by Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1994.	Orthodox pro-Moscow party; supported the Rajapaksas.
Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna	EBP			Organization of rightwing Buddhist monks who first helped to bring S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to power in 1956 and then assassinated him in 1959.
Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna	JVP	Rohana Wijeweera until he was executed in November 1989. Currently Anura Kumara Disسانayake	Briefly in power as part of the United People's Freedom Alliance with the SLFP from 2004 to 2005.	Combined Sinhala nationalism with an authoritarian brand of socialism; anti-govt uprising 1971; second uprising 1987-89; has renounced violence, entered parliamentary politics, and supports equal rights for minorities in a united Sri Lanka; today potentially part of pro-democracy forces
Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya	JSS			UNP-linked 'trade union,' was used as a paramilitary force by Jayawardene.
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam	LTTE	V. Prabhakaran		Started in 1976; one of several Tamil nationalist militias but became the dominant one by liquidating rival groups. Tamil nationalist, extremely authoritarian, and brutal, tortured and killed Tamils who disagreed with Prabhakaran.
United National Front for Good Governance or Yahapalanaya alliance	SLFP and UNP	Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe	2015-2019	In 2018 Sirisena tried to replace Wickremesinghe with Mahinda Rajapaksa as his prime minister, but parliament and the courts objected; Wickremesinghe was reinstated but the alliance fell apart.
Democratic Left Front	DLF	Vasudeva Nanayakkara		Nanayakkara was earlier in the LSSP; supported the Rajapaksas.

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna	SLPP	Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Mahinda Rajapaksa	2019-	The SLPP broke off from the SLFP; essentially consists of members loyal to the Rajapaksas. Gotabaya is president and Mahinda was PM but has been replaced by Ranil Wickremesinghe.
Samagi Jana Balavegaya	SJB	Sajith Premadasa		SJB split off from the UNP in 2019 alleging lack of democracy; rejects neoliberalism. The largest opposition party; has apparently agreed to BASL proposals to abolish the Executive Presidency; today potentially part of pro-democracy forces.
Tamil National Alliance	TNA	R. Sampanthan, M.A. Sumanthiran		An alliance of Tamil parties based in the North and East; demand abolition of the Executive Presidency and more devolution of power to the provinces; today potentially part of pro-democracy forces.
Bar Association of Sri Lanka	BASL			Association of senior lawyers in Sri Lanka. Has put forward a proposal to abolish the Executive Presidency in accordance with the constitution and the law.

ROHINI HENSMAN is a writer, independent scholar and activist who has written on workers' rights, feminism, minority rights and globalization. She is the author of *Journey Without a Destination: Is there a solution for Sri Lankan refugees?* and *Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism*.