

A Political Solution to the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

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The ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka began in the mid-1950s, yet little progress has been made at the negotiating table to settle their differences on the issues of regional autonomy for Tamil areas, colonization and economic development of Tamil-dominated districts. The military confrontation between the Tamil militants and government forces, which accelerated with the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, has resulted in a de facto separation of the island into a Sinhalese majority region and a Tamil majority region. Whatever impact the Tamil militant movement has on the geopolitics of Sri Lanka and South Asia, its activities are largely confined to a well defined region in the North-East Province where the Tamil-speaking people are in the absolute majority. When the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) was deployed in the North-East Province, only Tamil majority areas were under the direct supervision of the IPKF, while the Sinhalese majority areas in that province remained largely under the control of Sri Lankan security forces.

Large portions of rural sections of the Tamil majority region continued to remain under LTTE control when the war between the government security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) resumed in June 1990. By late 1990, government forces attempted to bring the Northern Province under their control by launching attacks on key towns along the main routes leading to the Jaffna Peninsula, the militant stronghold. At the outset, the security forces attempted a three-pronged attack on the

Jaffna Peninsula from the mainland. They encountered major setbacks along the routes, especially in Vavuniya and Kokkavil, and had to change their original strategy. Instead of gaining control of the main roads leading to the peninsula from the mainland, they strengthened their positions around the peninsula, including the Elephant Pass and the islands to the west.

By controlling the land and sea entry points to the Jaffna Peninsula, the army sealed it off from the mainland and prevented the LTTE from moving freely between the two locations. Tamil Nadu has been virtually sealed off from the Jaffna Peninsula, after the Indian government moved a number of ships into the Palk Straits to patrol the Indian coast and enforced strict security measures to prevent militants from entering or leaving. A high-ranking LTTE leader, Sathasivam Krishnakumar (alias Kittu), lost his life on January 16, 1993 while attempting to reach the Jaffna Peninsula by sea.¹ The army hopes to defeat the LTTE and to find a political solution to the ethnic problem by blockading the Jaffna peninsula, besieging it by launching attacks from land, sea and air.

There are no indications, however, that the security forces have complete control over the Northern Province or over most of the rural areas in the Eastern Province. Although they control the town of Vavuniya, the surrounding areas are under the control of militants. The army has already cut off food supplies, electric power and gasoline to the peninsula. It also intends to isolate the LTTE from the one million civilians of the region by mounting massive attacks on the Peninsula, using its air and artillery power. There is little doubt that these military tactics will only result in the killing of thousands of Tamil civilians, since it is impossible to isolate LTTE hide-outs from civilian settlements, especially be-

cause the peninsula, with its closely knit settlements, tall fences and market gardens, is very densely populated. While the security forces may succeed in inflicting heavy losses on the local population and the militants by attacking from the air and sea, they would face tough resistance from the militants on land. Indeed, there will be heavy losses on both sides if the attack were on land. It is not known what military strategy the army will ultimately adopt to launch its final assault on the Jaffna Peninsula, but it is safe to state that the odds of the Sri Lankan government defeating a guerrilla army, which has the support of the population of the peninsula, is doubtful. A massive assault on the peninsula will result in the genocide of the Tamils.

The government cannot, however, prolong this war because it costs thousands of dollars to maintain and supply the troops every day. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and donor countries have shown reluctance to furnish additional loans to Sri Lanka unless a real effort is made to put an end to the ethnic problem.

In addition, international pressure from human rights groups, including the UN Subcommittee on Human Rights and donor countries, may eventually compel Sri Lanka to halt human rights violations and find a solution to the ethnic conflict. Therefore, the future of peace in Sri Lanka and government's military operations in the North will depend on how fast it will respond to international pressure, both on the questions on human rights violations and on the use of borrowed money to fight the militants. At this stage, there are no signs that the army or the LTTE is willing to cease hostilities and to find a political settlement to the conflict. Nevertheless, there are indications, given the statements made recently by the LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, in an interview to the Brit-

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ish Broadcasting Corporation, that the militants may be willing to negotiate a political settlement if the Sinhalese-dominated government was willing to amend the constitution to grant semi-regional autonomy in order to the Tamil-majority region, under a full-fledged federal system of government.²

Since the ethnic composition of the Eastern province where Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim populations are equally divided, is so complex, it is impossible to find a lasting political solution to the ethnic problem even under a federal system of government. Moreover, the Sinhala majority will not accept a situation in which the LTTE is given the complete control of the North-East Province under a federal system of government, which includes many Sinhalese-majority divisions. This does not imply that the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces have no alternative but to fight it out to the bitter end because many thousands of civilians will lose their lives in such a protracted war. It is also unlikely that the people who have been directly or indirectly affected by the violence of the past and present will return to the devastated areas of Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Amparai and live peacefully in areas of ethnically mixed neighborhoods. Indeed, given the recent events in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, there is little hope that communal harmony can be restored in ethnically mixed-conflict zones in Sri Lanka.

One possible solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is to readjust the boundaries of the North-East Province, which were drawn during the British colonial period. Ethnic harmony can be restored in the North-East Province if the western boundary of the Eastern Province can be adjusted to exclude the Assistant Government Agent's (AGA) divisions that are Sinhalese-majority divisions. The Tamil majority could be given political control of the eastern two-thirds of the Eastern Province, while the rest of the province would be annexed to Sinhalese provinces. It is imperative, given the mistrust that the members of the major communities have of each other, that Tamil-speaking people and

Sinhalese should be given the opportunity to live in clearly defined, separate AGA divisions in the Eastern Province. If these readjustments to the boundary of the Eastern Province were accompanied with the establishment of a full-fledged federal system of government for the island, the members of the LTTE may be willing to enter into the political mainstream. Tamil militants have called upon the government to halt the policy of colonizing Sinhalese in Tamil areas because they fear that the government will carve out more Sinhalese electorates, in addition to the existent Amparai and Seruwila electorates. The LTTE became belligerent when the government openly challenged it by attempting to settle

fixed quota of Sinhalese to settle in Tamil districts is not going to end the ethnic conflict. Most of the violent incidents involving brutal killings of civilians by government forces and Tamil militants have occurred in Tamil majority AGA divisions rather than in the Sinhalese majority AGA divisions of Eastern Province. Moreover, the Tamil majority AGA divisions, which have been increasingly targeted for Sinhalese colonization since 1983, have generated most of the refugees in the Eastern Province.

It is feasible to preserve the territorial integrity of Tamil majority AGA divisions under a federal system of government by redefining the boundaries of the North-East Province using the 1981 Cen-

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Sinhalese peasants in the Mullaitivu and Batticaloa districts, via the Maduru Oya and Vali-Oya projects, during the 1980s. This hostile behaviour of the militants against the government is motivated by their desire to preserve their Tamil traditional homeland and the distinct identity of the Tamil-speaking people. They are also concerned that if Sinhalese settlement of Tamil areas goes unchecked, the political power of the Tamils will ultimately be undermined. To them, the only solution to end Sinhalese colonization of Tamil-speaking areas has been and continues to be the creation of a separate Tamil state. I have suggested in a previous study that the problem of colonization can be resolved by redefining the limits of the North-East Province so that Sinhalese majority areas, rather than Tamil-majority areas in the North-East Province, would become the focus of Sinhalese colonization.³ More than any other factor, land settlement policy of the government has contributed to the escalation of the ethnic conflict since the early 1980s. Indeed, the ethnic conflict cannot be resolved unless the problem of colonization is solved to the satisfaction of both Sinhalese and Tamils. Allowing for a

sus data on population.⁴ Likewise, under a federal system of government, Sinhalese citizens who are long time residents of the Tamil-speaking majority region would continue to reside in the area. Sinhalese who are not sponsored under government-funded colonization schemes could settle in the Tamil-speaking majority region. Spontaneous migration of Sinhalese into the Tamil-speaking majority region would be similar to the migration of hundreds of Tamil-speaking people into the Sinhalese-speaking majority region on a voluntary basis. Thousands of Tamils have taken temporary refuge in Colombo because it is no longer safe to reside in the war-torn Tamil majority districts. Indeed, individually funded Tamil migration into Sinhalese areas has not resulted in the creation of a Tamil electorate in Sinhalese areas. On the other hand, government-sponsored colonization of Sinhalese peasants in the north and east has contributed to the creation of Sinhalese electorates in the North-East Province. Sinhalese continue to maintain an absolute majority in all the districts in the Sinhalese majority region, except in the central and south central parts of the

country, where Tamils of Indian origin were settled by the British in the nineteenth century. Unless tangible solutions are found to resolve these problems, there cannot be any peace in the island.

To contain Sinhalese colonization to the Assistant Government Agent's divisions in which the Sinhalese have an absolute majority, the boundaries of the North-East Province should be redrawn so that Sinhalese majority AGA divisions will be detached from the North-East Province and annexed to the North Central and Uva Provinces. The AGA divisions that would be annexed to the North-Central and Uva Provinces under this plan are Padawi Siripura, Gomarankadawala, Morawewa, Western one-third of Thampalagamam, Kantalai, Padiyatalawa, Mahaoya, Uhana, Damana, Lahugala and Vavuniya South (Sinhalese).⁵

Sinhalese population in these divisions, is between 82.5 percent and 99.4 percent of the total, except for Morawewa and Thampalagamam, where the Sinhalese population is 55 percent and 31.4 percent, respectively. Nevertheless, Morawewa and the western one-third of Thampalagamam, which had approximately 11,654 Sinhalese in 1981, can become part of the Sinhalese-speaking majority region. This would make it feasible for Seruwila, where the Sinhalese population is 57.7 percent of the total population, to be an integral part of the Tamil-speaking majority region. Under this arrangement, the 11,654 Sinhalese from the Morawewa and Thampalagamam AGA divisions would become part of the Sinhalese-speaking majority region, while the 11,665 Sinhalese of the Seruwila AGA division would remain in the redefined North-East Province. The Seruwila and Kuchchaveli AGA divisions would furnish the linkage between the northern and southern Tamil-speaking majority areas of the North-East Province. Tamil leaders insist that this linkage must be maintained if there is to be lasting peace in Sri Lanka.⁶

By redrawing the boundaries of the North-East Province, the ethnic composition of the Tamil-speaking majority region would be altered. The reconstituted

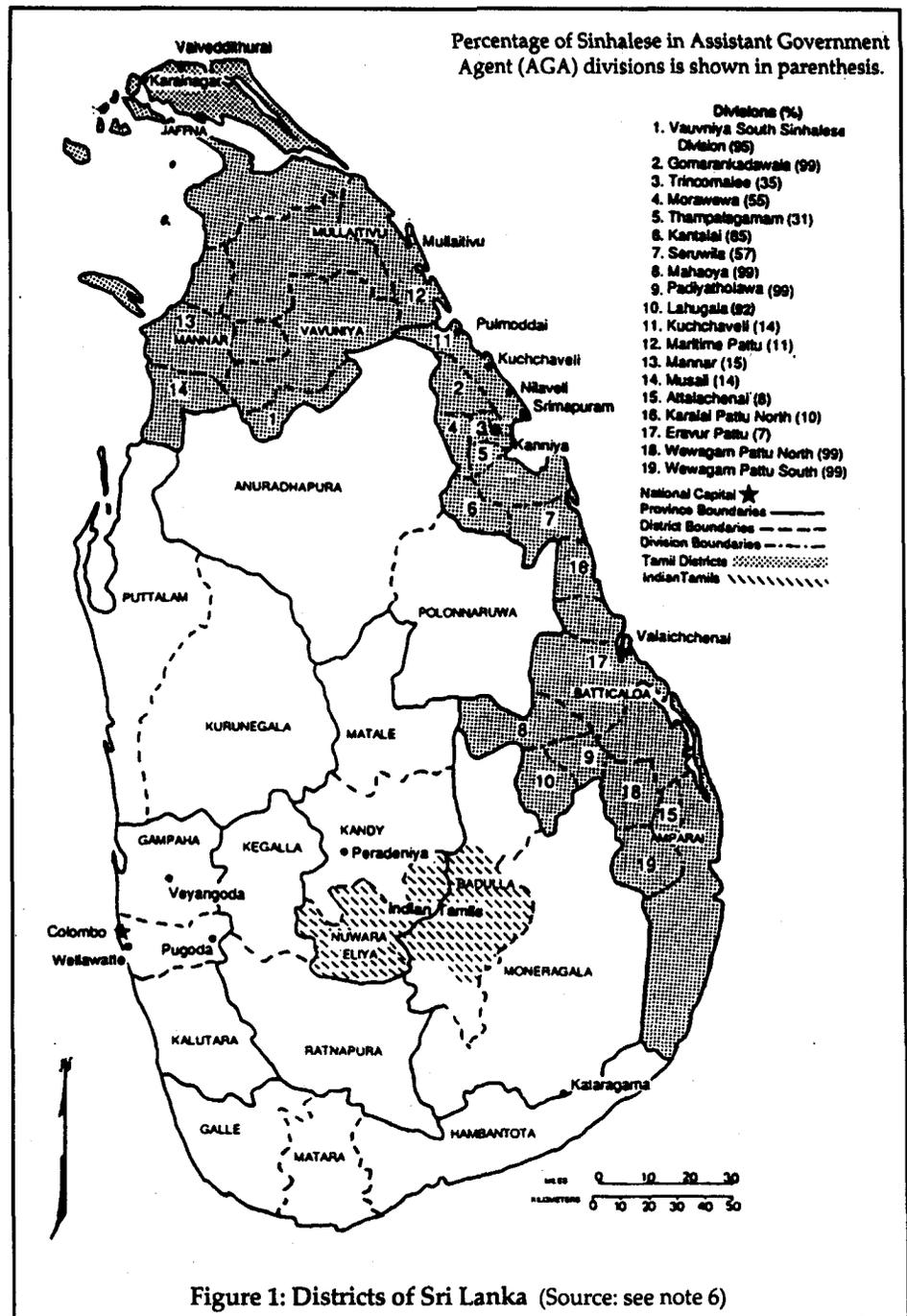


Figure 1: Districts of Sri Lanka (Source: see note 6)

Tamil-majority region would contain 94.9 percent Tamil-speaking people according to the 1981 census (see Figure 1). The rights of the Muslim minority in the redefined Tamil majority region could be guaranteed by enacting legislation and by devolving legislative and executive powers to the district councils, which should be established in areas where the Muslims are in the majority. Given the fact that Sinhalese leaders mistrust Tamil

leaders and vice versa, it might be necessary for the Sri Lankan government and the leaders of the LTTE to agree on a list of foreign countries that can be invited to participate in the peace process. It might even be necessary for an international organization like the United Nations to settle the issue of the boundary of a newly reconstituted North-East Province and to maintain ethnic harmony along the readjusted boundary.