

# Political Violence in Sri Lanka

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## An introduction

Prosterman in 1976 estimated that some 68 million people have perished from all forms of deliberate human violence from 1820 to 1970. Zimmerman in 2013 found that if the victims of state violence suffering from pogroms, brutal repression, and other forms of state coercion were added, the figure would be more than double this.

The discussion herein is limited to socio-structural conditions of political violence, their impact on society and the ideological tendencies such an impact compelled the Sri Lankan youth into. The short nature of this paper does not allow me to discuss the relevant historical international contexts.

## Political violence – pre-colonial and colonial days

Political violence in Sri Lanka can be traced back to feudalism, as manifested in regular invasions by South Indian rulers, wars to expand feudal territories, and assassinations for the transfer of royal power, and aggression and terror colonialists committed against indigenous people. De Zoysa and Fernando (2007) refer to 32 types of torture practised in ancient Sri Lanka. As taught in history lessons, these torture methods included being trampled by an elephant, being impaled on a pointed iron pole, or being torn apart by letting loose two tensioned trees onto which victims were tightly bound. Obviously, such cruel techniques would have been ‘lawfully’ inflicted by kings’ armed forces on political opponents. Torture was perceived as a legitimate means of obtaining confessions from political prisoners for convicting, banishing or executing them.

From the Kandyan Wars in 1801, 1802, 1803, etc. the British had learnt, and would have been contemplating ways of suppressing any new rebellions peasants might launch. The Uva-Wellassa Rebellion of 1818, led by Keppetipola Disawe and others against the British rule, was the most serious political-military attempt of the Kandyans to regain their independence. The military tactics of the British included setting fire to and laying waste the property of the Headmen (Mills, 1964).

The Kandyans were starved into submission. Their land was confiscated. Their dependents were debarred from the fruits of their ancestral wealth. Being forced to live in the jungles and mountains, they had lost their means of livelihood. The rebellion had collapsed by the end of October 1818.<sup>[1]</sup> The Government declared that those who fought against colonialism were traitors. The Rebellion was drowned in blood. 10,000 Kandyans were allegedly killed in action or died from disease or famine.

In the 1830s, under the Wastelands Ordinance, the British expropriated the common land of the peasantry reducing them to extreme poverty. Despite the tremendous pressure the colonial state was exerting, the dispossessed peasantry refused to abandon their traditional subsistence holdings and become wage-slaves. Under a notorious contract labour system, hundreds of

thousands of Malaiyaha workers, at the time called ‘Tamil coolies’ were brought in from South India. Tens of thousands of them died both on the journey and on the plantations.

Economic depression in Britain had drastically affected the local coffee and cinnamon industry. To alleviate a crisis, the state imposed an oppressive direct tax regime which included a tax on labour. In 1848, a mass movement grew against the new tax regime. The same year, Gongalegoda Banda was proclaimed the king of Kandy and Puran Appu his sword bearer. In an attempt to capture Kandy from the British, they attacked government buildings and destroyed some tax records.

The Governor declared martial law, and the British army shot many people dead. Puran Appu was captured and executed. Gongalegoda Banda was arrested while in hiding and was sentenced to death by hanging. Later this was commuted to 100 lashes and being deported to Malaysia. For the first time, in the Kandyan provinces, the leadership of the rebellion passed into the hands of ordinary peasants (de Silva, 1953).

These historic events help us understand the concept of political violence as carried out by the state and peoples’ resistance against such oppression.

### **Post-1948 political violence**

Political violence has been broadly categorised as being caused by national fragmentation, inequitable development, cultural clashes and liberation movements (Steinbach 1980). These causes do not exist in isolation, but usually interact simultaneously. Short-term but major political and armed conflicts manifested in the south in 1971 and then in 1987-1989. The JVP (Peoples’ Liberation Front) led both these insurrections. In the Tamil-dominated north and east of the island, militant ethnic nationalist groups emerged in the early 1970s demanding autonomy. Both the short-term and prolonged armed conflicts caused a massive transformation of the civil society and the country’s governance structures.

Wrecked by violence and civil war, Lanka’s post-independent history has involved paradoxical questions about democracy and peoples’ participation in decision-making. The democratic traditions including institutionalized checks and balances that allowed the disadvantaged and non-majoritarian voices to be heard and to effectively claim their democratic and human rights have been gradually made weaker. While it is impossible to sympathise entirely with the violence and methods used by groups in order to counter those trends, non-violent resistance to such trends also do not seem to have worked. One could say that many things have worsened with expanded armed forces, intensified violence and destruction, with increasingly intense opposition of a few to the material interests of the many in society.

Political threats transformed into deadly violence in a seemingly endless spiral, in 1971 and 1989 mainly in the south, and in 1970 to 2009 in the north. Despite the public exposure of violence and systematic human rights violations committed by the parties involved, a lack of judicial accountability has continued to perpetuate pervasive mistrust that undermined civil society. It has become necessary to focus on the legacy of state violence and its effects on society, in terms of justice, truth and reconciliation. We also need a critique of the often-romanticized versions of armed resistance and the notion of ‘reconciliation’ advocated or implemented that do not defuse tensions among diverse peoples.

## Radicalisation of the Youth

The basis for political violence by young people, particularly in the south, is linked to the post-colonial socio-economic and political developments. The colonial rulers made privileges available to the English-educated locals belonging to all communities, while treating the rest as slave labour, thus providing a fertile breeding ground for local nationalisms. The growing influence of the left in the south and the Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC)[\[2\]](#) in the north temporarily delayed the emergence of these radicalisations along ethno-nationalistic and linguistic lines.

The failure of the ruling elite in Sri Lanka to make appropriate socio-economic and political change alienated the majority of young people. Consequently, the country's youth turned to radical and violent practices against the elite's stranglehold on the levers of political patronage and economics. In the south, these revolutionary practices materialised in the form of class mobilisations. The attempts in the north and east, however, took the form of nationalist aspirations. The universal franchise and the lowering of the voting age allowed young people to take part in active electoral politics. Free education was introduced in 1945, and the medium of instruction was changed to local languages in 1956, which expanded higher educational opportunities available to youth.

The growth of the JVP and the LTTE underscored the role played by these socio-economic, political and cultural factors. The emerging political violence represented the anti-establishment sentiments of the country's younger generations. The JVP militancy predominantly represented the aspirations of the rural young lower-middle class Sinhala Buddhist constituency (Samaranayake 2008). The Tamil militancy represented the aspirations of the rural young lower-middle class Tamil constituency from both Hindu and Christian religious backgrounds.

The JVP successfully mobilised the southern youth, but committed strategic and tactical errors. It was brutally suppressed twice, but was able to regroup and rejuvenate, changing its focus from class to nationalism. The political aim of the JVP was to replace the existing establishment with a fairer one. The first JVP insurrection in 1971 occurred predominantly in the South, because the economic and social changes they expected from the United Front government that they helped to elect in 1970 were not forthcoming.

Since 1948, the Tamils in the island have been systematically denied their legitimate rights, mainly relating to equal opportunities in areas of language, education and employment.[\[3\]](#) Disenfranchisement of Malaiyaha Tamils in 1949 and the implementation of the Sinhala only language policy in 1956 led Tamil political parties to demand a federal framework. The abrogation of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam pact of 1958 and the Dudley-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1968 created a lot of anger, frustration and disillusionment among Sri Lankan Tamils that eventually led to the birth of separatist militant movements. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) adopted the Vaddukoddai Resolution in 1976, demanding Tamil Eelam, which had a massive impact on the political landscape of the island (Nesiah 2001).

The differences between the early militant Tamil political groups in the island were based on their different interpretations of Marxism-Leninism[\[4\]](#), yet the idea of achieving a separate state subsequently subsumed their commitment to socialism. Following the communal riots of July 1983, the government rushed through legislation to exclude from the parliament, any

party that refused to swear allegiance to the unitary state. This effectively disenfranchised Tamils in the north east and significantly weakened and isolated the democratic Tamil opposition. The Tamil militant movement was provided with a fertile ground for new recruitment. During the 1977 elections, many young Sri Lankan Tamils began to engage in extra parliamentary and sometimes violent measures in their bid for a mandate for a separate state. In the late 1980s, the LTTE emerged as the dominant Tamil militant group.

### **Response of the state and counter-responses**

Since the 1970s, younger generations from similar socio-economic backgrounds have revolted against the erosion of their economic, political and cultural rights. All governments regardless of their political hue have failed to see the underlying socio-political, economic and psychological causes of these revolts. The more repressive the state apparatus became the more violent the youth resistance became. Many socio-economic and political conditions that underpinned and contributed to the insurrections reflected the diverse, but significant and unfulfilled aspirations of the younger generations.

The articulation and assertion of nationalistic and economic demands for justice by the youth underpinned the emergence of political violence. One aimed at the capture of state power and the other at autonomy from the existing state. The economic growth and its unequal distribution in the post-1948 era did not help placating these demands; and breaking down the barriers of ethnicity and class. Their violence was a cry of the younger generations for economic and cultural parity.

Political violence has posed a serious challenge to the existing socio-economic order and the political institutions of the country. Therefore, successive governments have more often ruled the country under the draconian emergency regulations. The state has also used brutal counter-violence strategies to neutralise and discredit its opponents. It has also used material incentives to get groups and factions of its opponents to side with the state. Generally, the state makes use of supremacist or chauvinist ideologies to divide and distract the people.

Regimes and politicians relied on committing political violence to inspire fear among their opponents and civil society, either to come to power or to maintain their power base. This vicious cycle affected all layers of society (Jayatunge, 2013). It is significant that in post-1948 Sri Lanka, any major organised political violence was absent until 1952. Ethnic political violence that commenced in 1956 was mainly due to the machinations of modern 'democratic' electoral politics, deliberately conceived and orchestrated as a means of capturing and keeping power in the hands of elite. Gradually but increasingly political violence became part and parcel of the island's day-to-day life.

In the 1960s, the state used violence to suppress peaceful protests by the Sri Lankan Tamil youth. Their parliamentary representatives could not achieve any positive outcomes for their constituents through peaceful, non-violent campaigns and this led to them demanding secession. This situation led to cycles of political violence and counter violence. As political violence manifested in the north and east, the responses of the state and the Tamil militants caused an extension of this radicalisation and alienation within and among the Sri Lankan Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. Since the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983, Tamil militants, in particular the LTTE came to represent a major proportion of Sri Lankan Tamils, with the exception of Sri Lankan Malayiyaha Tamils and Sri Lankan Muslims.

The state's usual reaction to any socio-economic demand was to curtail freedom, weaken political institutions, and move towards authoritarianism. So, class mobilisation in the south became totally based on social exclusion and economic deprivation. From the hartal of 1953 to the general strike in 1980, from the 'satyagraha' campaigns in 1956 to the protest action against the 1972 Constitution and beyond repression has been the state's response to any demand for justice and equality[5]

Both state and non-state actors have used political violence including terror to target civilian populations, communities, their leaders and professionals. Regimes have often used 'assassination specialists'[6] to silence their opponents, persistently interweaving it with their normal political practices. Since the mid-fifties, these 'killer squads' have operated in the shadows 'committing' disappearances and the torture of political enemies of the state. This sort of violent behaviour by the states has generated other forms of political violence including the use of terror.

In addition, political leaderships of all ethnicities in Sri Lanka have opportunistically used ethnicity, language and religion as a bandwagon to establish, preserve and enhance their political, economic and social power, or to distract the people from the domestic policy and program failures of the establishment. Many analysts portray ethnicity as the central theme of the armed conflict[7] that ended in 2009, though ethnicity and culture were used as labels, economics remained the root cause of this conflict.

### **Causes of Violence**

In the post-1948 phase of capitalism, lack of appropriate political and economic development, lack of equitable distribution of economic benefits, lack of equitable job opportunities, and lack of socially inclusive policy calculus provided the essential ingredients for the radicalisation of the youth in Sri Lanka. The post-1948 political establishment concentrated mainly on short term tactical electoral gains by engaging in nepotism, family bandyism and class collaboration. The elitist power structures have been used to achieve political control over the people. Such structures have been strengthened through various forms of patronage. The impact of these processes severely eroded whatever democratic traditions and values the country had.

The changes introduced in 1977 in the form of neo-liberalism required a drastic change in the political system. The new economic and political model introduced many features that had been previously implemented under dictatorial regimes elsewhere. The new economic policy needed the apparatus of a very repressive form of governance. A new constitution was introduced in 1978 that led not only to an executive system with immense power concentrated in the hands of the president, but also made it almost impossible to abolish the new executive presidential system. However, many amendments to the Constitution have been made to concentrate more and more power in the hands of the executive presidency, the most recent being the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment.

These measures were and are seen as necessary to ensure political stability and encourage foreign direct investment in the island. These changes that were introduced to ensure rapid economic growth, led to the alienation of generations of youth away from the establishment. Global capital, its structures and instruments will continue to use political violence through the machinery of the state and other subservient forces to repress any opposition or its likelihood by those who are marginalised by the process of neo-liberal economic

restructuring. The marginalised will continue to resist against such violence, and such resistance may take the form political violence. Both the JVP and the LTTE have been the products of the failures of socio-economic and political development of Sri Lanka (Samaranayake 2008).

Reports indicate that Sri Lankan Malayaha Tamil youth, particularly in the south, have been at the receiving end of racist attacks. The coming decades will be critical for these youth because without significant government intervention, the number of over-educated and under-employed young people will continue to grow.

Due to several factors, the LTTE political violence turned against the Muslims. One of these factors was the opposition of Muslims to the merger of the North and East under the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. Close to 100,000 Muslims were expelled from the North (Ameerdeen 2006).<sup>[8]</sup> Recently, incidents against Sri Lankan Muslims, boycotting of Muslim owned businesses, attacks on their mosques, and protests against Islamic practices have been reported. The underlying tensions do not bode well for the inhabitants of Sri Lanka.

Abduction of political opponents, attacks on media and journalists, and disruption of political activities by security forces, heavy military presence, land grabs and expansion of high security zones in the North and East continue to play a prominent role in the repressive agenda of the Sri Lankan state.

## **Conclusion**

The political violence of young people is a manifestation of birth pangs of a society, in which the political transition for achieving inclusive, equitable and participative political reforms have been hindered. The post-colonial state never considered it significant to protect the dignity and security of marginalised and disadvantaged social groups. Domestic issues were viewed and dealt with in a mindset of a conflict paradigm. Unless democratic space for peoples' participation and change is made available and movement towards an inclusive, equitable and participative future is made possible, political violence in such a society would be inevitable.

The history of the Sri Lankan state indicates that it has continuously disregarded and/or violently suppressed peaceful demands of its people for social inclusion, equity, justice, security and dignity. The indignity and insecurity imposed on the physical and psychological integrity of individuals and communities contributed and motivated them to take up arms. On the other hand, use of violence as a strategy of social transformation by small or large groups promotes the erroneous idea that, without active participation and support of the people, these groups can represent the interests of the people, act as 'saviours' of the people, and transform society on behalf of the people. History has repeatedly shown that such strategies have not only failed in the long term, but also caused great harm to peoples' movements, and prevented peoples' active participation and leadership in the process of social change.

Economic development, equitable distribution of its outcomes, social inclusion and participatory democracy are essential for a society to progress. The past violent political upheavals in Sri Lanka can be attributed to poverty, inequality and exclusion, and to growing tendencies of lack of transparency, diminishing democratic practices, totalitarianism, family bandysm and corruption. Since the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, peoples' hopes have been centred more on establishing the rule of law, securing civilian rule over the

military, ending family bandysm and corruption, and establishing a better and fairer society. However, the country seems to have been gradually transformed into an increasingly totalitarian and insecure state.

The injustices faced by the Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims due to the prolonged ethnic conflict and challenges they face due to globalisation need to be recognised and addressed. Both the state and the militant organisations have been responsible for political violence and human and democratic rights violations. However, governments need to bear a heavy responsibility in this regard, as they are elected to govern all the people and communities in the island, regardless of their ethnicity, culture and political affiliations.

There is an urgent need to break with the past. Ensuring the aspirations of the marginalised are met, requires a paradigm shift in the attitudes and thinking of the majority to a critical, inclusive and constructivist mode towards the marginalised in society. The marginalised in turn need to invent the characteristics of a new society that would assist in materialising their aspirations. If the state fails to treat all communities with respect and dignity, restore the rule of law, and take positive steps to build peace with justice, there is the danger of resentments spilling over into renewed conflict.

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[1] Pieris, Ceylon and the Hollanders, 156-7, Manball, Ceylon. 31-6, In Mills, L. A. (1964). *Ceylon Under British Rule 1795-1932*, Routledge.

[2] JYC was a dominant political force in the North in 1920s and 1930s and appreciated the harmonious and tolerant relations that existed at the time between Sinhalese and Tamils, Moors and Burghers (Nesiah 1945)

[3] It is worth noting that such policies even affected Sinhalese in the south and led to discriminatory outcomes against them.

[4] The EPRLF was more orthodox; the EROS was Marxist; the PLOTE advocated a socialist revolution; and the TELO did not adhere to any ideology except for achieving a separate state. The LTTE at times advocated socialism, but as a whole was committed to achieving a separate state.

[5] The common features of this repressive policy comprised of detention of youth for extended periods of time in jails, maltreatment, torture and death while in custody, high handed action to disrupt civil activity, prolonged solitary confinement and holding people incommunicado without legal or family access, enforced disappearances, killing youth in a ratio of one to ten or more to terrorise civilians, aerial bombardment of villages and scorched earth policies.

[6] paramilitary forces, secret police, and thugs

[7] Ethnic conflict may occur between aggregations of people that share a collective view of themselves as being distinctively different from other aggregations of people because of their shared inherent characteristics such as their race, religion, language, cultural heritage, clan, or tribal affiliation.

[8] Muslims saw the percentage of their population would drop after the merger from nearly 35 per cent in the East to about 17 per cent in a combined North and East.