

## **International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka**

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### **Session 1: Causes of the Conflict & Factors leading to Ceasefire**

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#### **The Dynamics of Inter-ethnic Political Integration and Disintegration: A Century of Sinhala-Tamil Conflict and Peace-making in Retrospect**

For many centuries in the post-Christian era, the Tamils of Ceylon zealously safe-guarded their identity as a distinct social entity with a culture, civilization, laws, language, territory and religion of their own. Many Christian denominations through their missionary activities in the a past four centuries proselytized about 8% of the Tamil population but the converts continued to conserve their culture, traditions and language with a homogeneity that defied any form of communitarian separateness. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more specifically in the second half of the last century this collective Tamil social consciousness has become transformed into a vibrant form of an irreversible nationalist fervour largely catapulted by the communal political agenda of the Sinhala elite and their ruling class. We shall explain how.

The early cracks of Sinhala-Tamil disintegration within a unitary system of government under British rule began to appear toward the end of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when territorial representation replaced communal representation in the Legislative Council. The formation of the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) in 1919 with representatives from the three communities namely Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, was a vehicle that could have salvaged the island polity from disintegration along communal lines, but “it was the unwillingness to accommodate and to compromise” with the non-Sinhala ethnic communities that led to the break up of the CNC when its founding President Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam left its ranks in 1921. In fairness to the Ponnambalam brothers of national fame it should be said that despite their Tamil identity and their clear perceptions of a growing pan-Sinhala State system with its oppressive designs they were willing cooperate up to a point where inter-ethnic integration could still be fostered.

Mr. G.G. Ponnambalam, as astute lawyer-politician was the foremost Tamil leader of in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the founder leader of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress in the pre-independence period, he argued before the Royal Commission of Inquiry led by Lord Soulbury, for a communally balanced representation. The commission favoured territorial representation and having suggested a few safe-guards to the non-Sinhala ethnic groups and religious minorities left both to the mercy of the numerical majority.

To the Tamils, the alarm bells began to sound within a few months of independence, when the Sinhala government based on a unilaterally imposed constitution enacted legislations in 1948-49 that disfranchised and decitizenised overwhelming numbers of hill country Tamils and thereby altered drastically the representational picture. In reaction to this discriminatory legislation and smelling the impending dangers of political annihilation or assimilation of the Tamil nation, Mr. S.J.V. Chelvanayagam not only split the ACTC right in the middle but opted for an ideology that

virtually advanced a quasi-separatist claim for self-rule in opposition to G.G. Ponnambalam who stood for 'responsive cooperation' with the Sinhala ruling elite.

The intended duality in the names that Chelvanayagam gave his party in Tamil and English clearly indicated the direction the Tamils were setting themselves for though officially the party was known as Federal party. The substance of their political platform was contained in three demands, viz. the status of the hill country Tamils (Chelvanayagam refused to refer to them as Indian Tamils), the ending of state-aided colonization of the traditional Tamil homelands and the need to have both Sinhala and Tamil recognized as official languages. In the resolution published at its first convention the Federal party stressed 'the Tamil people's unchallengeable title to Nationhood and the right to political autonomy and federal union with the Sinhalese.' (see, *The Case for a Federal Constitution for Ceylon: Resolutions Passed at the First National Convention of the Ilanakai Tamil Arasu Kadchi*, Colombo, 1951)

Undoubtedly Chelvanayagam was the prophetic leader of the Tamils particularly in the third quarter of the last century. He confined his protests, demonstrations and active non-cooperation based on the Gandhian model of non-violence within the parliamentary frame-work. But all this produced little or no effect with the various Sinhala political parties of the right and left wing that alternatively assumed power.

In the history of Tamil politics, the last quarter of the last century had been most eventful and the most brutal in every aspect of their socio-cultural and political life. It is a period soaked in blood, filled with death, destruction, disappearances, displacement, forced migration, economic deprivations and all other social humanitarian and personal ills that can be brought by an internecine and interminable war on a people fighting ultimately for their life, dignity, self-respect and survival in the context of retaining their territory, language, religion and culture. Velupillai Pirabakaran a highly skilled politico-military tactician and his organization called the LTTE have emerged as the unanimously acknowledged sole representative of all Eelam Tamils.

At this point it is important to focus on some key-issues that have rapidly brought this island polity to its present impasse. A close look into the five decades of the post-independence period from the Tamil perspective, would unveil the contours of the malignant growth of Sinhala communal politics and policies that has incessantly brought this nation to the brink of disaster.

It all began in the mid 1950s with the Sinhala linguistic imperialism advocated and advanced by S.W.R.D. Banadaranaike who intensified the communal political platform through his Sinhala only legislation which deliberately curtailed the private and public sector employment opportunities of the Tamils and reduced the Tamil language and community to a second class. His widow who came to power in the 1960s continued along the line of her husband by altering the educational system in favour of the Sinhala-Buddhists through the take over of publicly funded schools, expulsion of missionaries and imposition of military rule to curb all forms of protests and public demonstrations. Mr. Chelvanayagam's peace-making efforts with Dudley Senanayake in 1964-65 proved futile and unproductive in terms of resolving any of the core issues of the Tamil population. Again in the 1970s Sirimavo Bandaranaike came back to power. In 1972 she gave constitutional entrenchment to the communal vision of "the land, the race and the faith," and thereby reduced all non-Sinhala languages, and non-Buddhist religions to a secondary status.

She also enacted legislations such as "standardization" which was covertly aimed at reducing the number of Tamil students seeking higher education in Universities and tertiary institutions. She inaugurated the pogromisation of Tamils initially with the iron hand of her armed forces. Mr J.R. Jeyewardene who succeeded Sirimavo built on the communal foundations laid by her. The

period from 1979-82 saw the arbitrary arrests torture, murder and maiming of Tamil youth. The torching of the Jaffna public library with all its cultural treasures in 1981 under the supervision of two Sinhala cabinet ministers from Colombo and in 1983 Jeyewardene virtually disenfranchised almost the entire Tamil community through the sixth amendment to the constitution which deprived the majority of Tamil MPs of their seat in the Sri Lankan parliament. Much has been written and documented about the state-aided pogromisation of the Tamils in July 1983 and in subsequent years.

From 1983 until 1990 the Central government of India played unsuccessfully a mediatory role between the Tamil freedom fighters and the Sinhala State which ultimately ended up with a severe loss of life to the Indians as well as to the Tamils. The Indo-Lanka pact entered into amidst much opposition from all parties' concerned, failed to produce any tangible results as predicted by the antagonists and protagonists. Three different Presidents held the reigns of power in the Sinhala nation between 1990 and 2000. This period saw the intensification of the civil war and the worst forms of military atrocities with mounting Tamil civilian casualties as a result of numerous aerial bombardments, massive cordon and search operations, naval attacks in the coastal belts and other forms of fire-power used by gunship helicopters, multi barrel shell launchers and mortars. Numerous humiliations that the Tamils were made to suffer out-side of their homelands in the Sinhala regions.

For the Tamils living in the very terrain where the war is fought and death is caused, the LTTE and its leadership became the sole saviours of their plight and pain. The LTTE ensured the safety and security and became a mini-State within the macro-Sinhala State. LTTE's victories and defeat became the victories and defeats of the Tamils. The symbiotic union that underlies the LTTE-Tamil relationship both within and outside of Sri Lanka should therefore be viewed in light of the death and devastation that has been wrought on the Tamil community by the arrogance and intransigence of the Sinhala State to share power and to treat the other as equal deserving of respect and dignity. Constitutional recognition of language or cultural rights are only a manifestation of the fundamental right to life, property and survival, because Tamil Rights are in essence Human Rights.

Having recaptured a fair section of the Tamil territory and after having gradually established their administrative strength in the arena of law and order through their own police force and legal structures, having evolved administrative mechanism to address the needs over two million Tamils living in the contiguous Tamil areas of North and East the LTTE from a unparalleled position of politico-military strength declared a unilateral ceasefire in on December 21, 2000 and expected a reciprocal gesture from the Sinhala State. Almost a month prior to this he stated in his Great Heroes day address that

*"Our liberation organisation is prepared to participate in negotiations to find a political solution to the ethnic conflict through peaceful means. We are not opposed to peaceful processes of resolving conflicts. Nor are we reluctant to engage in peaceful dialogue. We are seeking a negotiated settlement that would be fair, just, and equitable and that it would satisfy the political aspirations of the Tamil people.... It is practically difficult for both the parties who have been involved in a savage and bloody war for the last two decades with mutual animosity and distrust to suddenly enter into a peace process, while continuing hostilities. It is precisely for this reason we propose a process of de-escalation of war leading to cessation of armed hostilities and the creation of a peaceful, cordial environment."*

Despite the Sri Lankan government's rejection of the LTTE's offer of ceasefire LTTE as a 'political stunt' the LTTE extended it by one more month and appealed to the international

community especially the USA, UK, other European nations and to India to use their good offices to persuade Sri Lanka to reciprocate positively to their peace gesture. This was in vain. The LTTE felt that instead of commending and promoting their peace offensive some international Governments sought to impose proscription and other restrictions against them while the other party in conflict (Sri Lankan State) was being provided with financial assistance, military aid and training facilities thereby encouraging the government's hard-line militaristic approach against the Tamil populace.

The scenario changed when it allegedly the LTTE carried out an audacious attack on Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike international airport and the adjoining air force base at Katunayake on 24 July 2001. This and other military victories including the fall of the impenetrable Elephant Pass military camp seemingly changed the military power balance in favour of the LTTE. However a mutually agreed cessation of hostilities came into effect on 23 February 2002 under the supervision of an international monitoring team.

As a concrete outcome of this ceasefire agreement direct talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE began at the Sattahip naval base in Thailand on 16 September 2002.