

# Sri Lanka at Sixty: A Legacy of Ethnocentrism and Degeneration

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When Sri Lanka celebrated independence in 1948 many considered it the post-colonial country most likely to succeed economically and democratically. Sixty years later the island represents illiberalism, political decay, and ethnocentrism. Not only has the country retrogressed on nearly all important indicators representing secularism, liberalism, pluralism, ethnic coexistence, and good governance, it is also poised to degenerate further towards dictatorship.

When Sri Lanka gained independence in February 1948 many believed that the island had "the best chance of making a successful transition to modern statehood" (Wriggins 1961: 316). The bases for thinking so were sound: independence was granted amicably without the tumultuous and fissiparous nationalist movements evidenced in British India, so that many in the hinterlands hardly knew a major transition had taken place; Sinhalese elites had assuaged Tamil elites who had demanded equal political representation between the majority Sinhalese and minorities that all Ceylonese would be treated dispassionately, and the latter too eagerly collaborated to attain independence; universal franchise had been in place since 1931 and democracy and pluralism appeared to have taken hold; and the country's socio-economic indices were ahead of other states in especially Asia and Africa. In short, polyethnic and multi-religious Sri Lanka was well set to create a liberal, progressive, and stable regime that would be an exemplar.

Sixty years later nothing could be further from the truth, the state is ruled by hypernationalists whose ideology is rooted in Sinhalese Buddhist superordination and minority subordination; the country's leaders are bent on eradicating a Tamil separatist terrorist movement nurtured by Sinhalese Buddhist ethnocentrism and racism that is likely to have killed over 100,000 people; tens of thousands of Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese have been displaced due to 25 years of civil war; venal and predatory politicians run amuck resorting to fisticuffs in parliament and unfettered gangsterism in public against political opponents; a grossly overstuffed bureaucracy enslaved to political favouritism and nepotism wallows in rampant corruption; the state's security forces and paramilitary goons resort to murder, rape, extortion, kidnapping, torture, and depredation especially against beleaguered Tamils with such alacrity that the country has been vilified internationally for human rights violations; the island has the lowest press freedom rating among democratic states in the entire world, with Reporters Without Borders claiming journalists endure "murder, attacks, abductions, intimidation, and harassment" (BBC News 2008); all of which has led to democracy and the rule of law being undermined, with the resulting shambles creating a culture of violence, anomie, and impunity.

Indeed, Sri Lanka celebrated its 60th year of independence amidst fear that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is fighting the government to create a separate Tamil state, would attack the proceedings. The political and social decay facing the country on its diamond jubilee was perhaps best represented by the "motley group of young, urbanised thugs sporting

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shorts, rubber slippers, singlets and t shirts" that the Mahinda Rajapaksa government recruited to help bolster security checkpoints (Samarasinghe 2008).

### Degenerated State

According to the Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy* magazine, which together oversee the Failed State Index, Sri Lanka was ranked 20th in 2008, in worse shape than perennially troubled states like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Branding a country a failed state or one at risk of becoming a failed state is problematic because a country must have failed drastically on many fronts to qualify for such an odious status. The Failed State Index thus utilises 12 indicators, taking the cumulated average to determine propensity for failure.

Many refer to Max Weber's classic *Politics as a Vocation* and define a state as an entity that enjoys a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. From this territorial standpoint Sri Lanka could be branded a failure given that the state has not controlled all of its territory for 25 years; but doing so is spurious because by such a standard numerous countries considered stable would have to be considered failures merely because paramilitary or non-democratic forces hold sway in certain areas. For example, nearly 160 of India's over 600 districts are controlled by so-called Naxalite elements, some of whom have introduced their own tax laws and courts; and Kashmir and states in the north-east have long been restive and unstable. Yet India does not get branded a failed state. This is mainly because by various other standards (i.e., consolidation of democracy, economic growth, vulnerability to outside pressures, and relative power capability in the international state system) India remains quite robust.

Thus a state may be considered a failure or likely to fail not because it does not indisputably control every inch of its territory but because the institutions that guarantee law and order and dispassionate, honest, and efficient governance cease to function. As former UN secretary general Boutros Boutros Ghali noted, "the collapse of state institutions, especially the police and the judiciary, with resulting paralysis of governance, a breakdown of law and order, and general banditry and chaos" typically contribute towards state failure. "Not only are the functions of government suspended, but its assets are destroyed or looted and experienced officials are killed or flee the country".<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka does not fully fit this description; it therefore cannot be branded a failed state using these criteria.

Yet it is a country that has failed woefully in many areas, principally in how its most fundamental state institutions (i.e., legislature, judiciary, police, defence forces, bureaucracy, and public education) have undergone political decay.<sup>2</sup> Worse, this political decay is mainly due to the calibrated illiberalism<sup>3</sup> successive governments engineered to marginalise, dominate, and subjugate the island's minority communities, so much so that the island is today better characterised as an "ethnocentric democracy" or "illiberal democracy".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the country may be best characterised as an "ethnocracy".<sup>5</sup> When considering the baneful, even nefarious, influence Buddhist monks have had on Sri Lanka's politics and given how politicians of all stripes pander to these monks' whims and fancies especially on

ethnic issues, it may just as well be branded a *therocracy* (or government by *theras*)".<sup>6</sup>

What one can perhaps argue is that while Sri Lanka is not a failed state, it is a state that has degenerated because the island has regressed on nearly all important indicators representing secularism, liberalism, pluralism, ethnic coexistence, and good governance. The southern part of the country has seen a fair degree of development, yet the fact remains that from especially the standpoints of governance and ethnic relations every succeeding decade since independence has turned out worse than the previous decade. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh too have failed to live up to their potential. However, these countries gained independence amidst violent partition and civil war, were predicted to disintegrate further, and given little chance of succeeding. From that standpoint, India and Bangladesh especially have done relatively well. Comparatively, Sri Lanka in the 1950s was placed in the same league as South Korea; and Lee Kwan Yew, in the early stages of Singapore's independence, hoped his marshy, mosquito-infested island could emulate Sri Lanka. In that sense, not only has Sri Lanka failed as a potential exemplar, it is also poised to degenerate beyond the current majoritarian and ethnocentric dispensation towards dictatorship.

### Ethnocentric Antecedents

The high expectations for the island at the time of independence notwithstanding, one of the very first decisions Sri Lanka's new leaders made was rooted in racism; and this pertained to not conferring citizenship on hundreds of thousands of Indian Tamils born and raised in the country (with many being fourth and fifth generation denizens). The British brought the Indian Tamils from south India to work as indentured labourers beginning in the 1830s and by the time the country gained independence they were fully incorporated into the island's tea estates. The leftist and communist parties had campaigned on behalf of these estate labourers and consequently won most of their allegiance, which the conservative United National Party (UNP) found problematic. Yet Indian Tamils were denied citizenship mainly because Sinhalese Buddhist leaders feared that they threatened the demographic advantage the upcountry Sinhalese had long enjoyed. The rhetoric and justifications used make this amply clear.<sup>7</sup> Some Tamil politicians from the north, influenced by their retrograde casteist proclivities, supported the policy.<sup>8</sup> The irony was that this, in turn, strengthened Sinhalese Buddhist representation in the legislature and made it easier for Sinhalese parliamentarians to eventually discriminate against Sri Lankan Tamils as well.

Some like to argue that Sri Lanka would have avoided Sinhalese Buddhist ethnocentrism and the subsequent civil war had D S Senanayake, the country's first prime minister, lived longer. They conveniently forget that it was D S Senanayake who oversaw the disenfranchisement of Indian Tamils on demographic and racial grounds even as he pursued Sinhalese colonisation of traditionally Tamil areas in the north-east; and that there is no reason to believe he would not have acted just as expeditiously as did his son Dudley Senanayake and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leader S W R D Bandaranaike when trying to perpetuate political power.

The single most important cause that sundered Sinhalese-Tamil comity and marked the island for civil war was the movement that made Sinhala the country's only official language in 1956 (DeVotta 2004). The Sinhala only demand ensued when many Sinhalese began opposing the so-called *swabasha* movement (which would have provided parity of status to both Sinhala and Tamil) and instead clamoured for Sinhala alone to be made the country's official language. Their position was championed by opportunistic and unprincipled politicians like S W R D Bandaranaike, who manipulated the burgeoning chauvinism in their community to capture power. Bandaranaike aspired to become prime minister as a member of the UNP. However, he left the party to join the opposition and create the SLFP upon realising that D S Senanayake was grooming his son for the prime minister position.

When the UNP discovered it was going to lose the 1956 elections by championing linguistic parity, it too adopted a Sinhala only platform. Thereafter both the UNP and SLFP resorted to ethnic outbidding, with each trying to outdo the other on promoting Sinhalese Buddhist preferences and maximising Sinhalese Buddhist gains (*ibid*). This led to racist rhetoric that undermined the promise of a united Sri Lanka where all communities could coalesce peacefully.

### **Suppression and Resistance in 1950s**

The 1956 election saw a landslide victory for the SLFP, which soon thereafter introduced the Sinhala Only Act. Peaceful Tamil protests outside parliament led to attacks that started the first ever anti-Tamil riots killing over 150 Tamils. The government's attempt to impose vehicle number plates with Sinhala lettering in the north-east led to further Tamil protests and culminated in the 1958 anti-Tamil riots. Bandaranaike sought to appease Tamils by making Tamil a regional language (among other things) but the chauvinists he had manipulated would have none of it. The ethnic outbidding culture that soon became consolidated saw both the UNP and SLFP oppose a compromise whenever one party sought to mollify Tamils.

A Buddhist monk assassinated Bandaranaike in September 1959 and the SLFP recruited Bandaranaike's widow, Sirimavo, to head the party. A woman with no political experience who had been relegated to the kitchen during her husband's lifetime thus became the world's first female leader in 1960. While respected for being incorruptible, Sirimavo Bandaranaike did more to marginalise the island's Tamils than anyone before her. Be it due to nescience, arrogance, or ethnocentrism, her two governments (1960-65 and 1970-77) pursued policy upon policy geared to make Tamils second class citizens: for instance, they avoided developing Tamil areas in the north-east and instead developed Sinhalese areas; barred Tamils from being hired into the government service; forced the remaining Tamil civil servants to learn Sinhala in order to be promoted; stationed Sinhalese civil servants in Tamil areas, disregarding the difficulties this posed to Tamils when interacting with these transplants who knew no Tamil; instituted Sinhala only into the courts system in the predominantly Tamil north-east; instituted policies that required Tamil students to score higher to enter the university system; created a quota

system so that Sinhalese students from especially rural areas could enter the university at the expense of hitherto overrepresented Tamils; banned Tamil publications promoting Tamil culture from nearly Tamil Nadu; pursued Sinhalese colonisation by flooding traditionally Tamil areas with Sinhalese from the south; and disregarded Tamil input when crafting an ethnocentric constitution that codified Sinhala as the only national language and Buddhism as the foremost religion. The UNP government during 1965-70 rolled back the policy of Sinhala only in the court system and sought to be more sensitive toward Tamils' legitimate grievances, but it was unable to defenestrate the majoritarian political culture that demanded Sinhalese Buddhist superordination and minority subordination. As Nigel Harris (1990: 222) aptly noted, "If the god's had wished to destroy, the madness of Sri Lanka's rulers gave them every opportunity".

### **The Blame Game**

Sinhalese Buddhist politicians and their apologists avoid discussing such ethnocentric antecedents and instead harp conveniently on the LTTE's terrorist practices. They also blame India for training Tamil militants in the 1980s<sup>9</sup> and imposing the Indian Peace Keeping Force and Provincial Council system as part of the July 1987 Indo-Lanka Agreement. As the *Sunday Times* noted as late as in 2006, "We must keep reminding ourselves that Sri Lanka's 'ethnic problem' was conceived, incubated and hatched in New Delhi". Blaming LTTE terrorism and Indian interference masks the fact that it was the racist policies successive Sri Lankan governments institutionalised that caused Tamil separatism (Wilson 2000, Sivarajah 1996 and Tambiah 1986). For these policies marginalised and humiliated especially young Tamils, who gradually dislodged moderate Tamil politicians and adopted militant ideologies to counter the state. As Tamil youth turned radical, the military, which had begun operating in the Northern Province like an occupation force beginning in the early 1960s, turned oppressive. The cycle of violence has brutalised both communities, with the island's Muslims in the north-east also paying a heavy price.

The principal Tamil demand following the Sinhala Only Act being instituted centred on devolution for the Northern and Eastern Provinces where Tamils were the dominant community. S W R D Bandaranaike and Dudley Senanayake had both considered providing the Tamils devolution within a unitary state structure but had to abrogate their agreements with Tamil leaders due to pressure from Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists. By the time the J R Jayewardene-led UNP government assumed office in July 1977 it was clear that some sort of compromise was in urgent need to stem the burgeoning violence in especially the Northern Province. Having attained power with a five-sixths parliamentary majority, the Jayewardene government was well equipped to make whatever constitutional changes necessary to pacify the Tamils. While it did introduce a new constitution in August 1978 that recognised Tamil as a national language (and also created a powerful presidential system of governance), and while Jayewardene cavalierly and whimsically passed numerous constitutional amendments in the subsequent 10 years, he did nothing to promote devolution. He instead sought to gain political mileage

by crushing the incipient Tamil rebellion, which only led to more violence.

No sooner had the new UNP government assumed office, its supporters unleashed a new wave of anti-Tamil riots. This was apparently in reaction to Tamil militarism in the north-east. The 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act allowed the police to arrest and leave incommunicado for 18 months anyone suspected of terrorism, and this caused numerous innocent Tamils to be imprisoned and tortured, which only radicalised them further. Government goons and military personnel also torched the famous Jaffna Public Library, destroying over 1,00,000 rare manuscripts. Then in 1983, in reaction to the LTTE ambushing and killing 13 army soldiers, anti-Tamil rioting broke out throughout the island while the state did nothing to stop the mayhem. Indeed, the army and police encouraged the rape, looting, and murder of Tamils. Tamils who fled to their villages and towns in the north-east and abroad as refugees soon mobilised to wage a military campaign for secession and 1983 marks the beginning of the civil war.

### **The LTTE's Intransigence**

It took Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhist leaders just 35 years to muck up the country's politics and influence a civil war that has now lasted 25 years. The LTTE's intransigence and inability to settle for a political solution coupled with successive governments being unable and unwilling to craft a devolution package that allows Tamils to live with dignity, self-respect, and limited autonomy represent the two principal reasons the conflict has lasted so long.

Sri Lanka is not going to be sundered. The recent military gains by the country's armed forces coupled with how the government has made satraps out of former LTTE cadres in the Eastern Province suggest that the LTTE's quest for Eelam (a separate Tamil state) is increasingly in regress. However, as long as the LTTE's leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran is alive, the group is unlikely to be completely wiped out. It may instead revert to a guerrilla war that could destabilise Sri Lanka in the future. A number of reasons have contributed to the outfit's setbacks, and these include divisions within the organisation, its megalomaniac leader's determination to create Eelam via military means alone, its inability to tolerate dissent, ruthless taxation policies in areas under its control, and practices such as suicide terrorism, bombs targeting innocent Sinhalese civilians, and forcible recruitment of children. No separatist outfit became as formidable as did the LTTE and yet no separatist outfit has so undermined its military prowess due to the inherent contradictions and fissures within the organisation. It is also ironic that a group that claims to fight for Tamils' freedom is despised by many Tamils living in Sri Lanka. Those who grudgingly sympathise with it do so because they believe the LTTE's military prowess is all that is left to extract political concessions from the Sri Lankan regime, not because they endorse the LTTE's claim that it is the sole representative of the island's Tamils.

The Sri Lankan government's standard refrain has been that the country faces a terrorist problem, not an ethnic problem. The fact is that there is an ethnic problem and a terrorist problem, and both the government and the LTTE are responsible for perpetrating

terrorism. The international community has severely criticised the Sri Lankan government for its human rights abuses against minorities, but the government has used deftly the so-called war against terrorism to mask its atrocities. While the government can justifiably claim that defeating the LTTE would represent a victory against terrorism, the irony in this instance is that such an outcome would also represent total victory for Sinhalese Buddhist ethnocentrism and racism. For not only will there be no incentive for any Sri Lankan government to accommodate Tamils' grievances once the LTTE is out of the picture; but Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists would ensure that Tamils continue to be humiliated even as they consolidate Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy in the north-east. The Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology dictates that Tamils who dared challenge Sri Lanka's unitary status need to be defeated militarily and humiliated. These nationalists feel that the LTTE's past victories merely add to the colonial era humiliations Sinhalese Buddhists suffered; and the community's self-respect can be regained and the nationalist project advanced only if the LTTE (and Tamils) are in turn humiliated irredeemably.

Indeed, irrespective of whether or not the LTTE is eliminated, Sri Lanka at 60 represents a state where Sinhalese Buddhist ethnocentrism has been victorious and where the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology is now consolidated. This does not at all bode well for the island's minorities, and in a perverse way this success merely highlights the degree to which the country has retrogressed from its initial promise of polyethnic and multi-religious coexistence.

### **The Nationalist Ideology and Potential Dictatorship**

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology is rooted in the belief that Sri Lanka is the designated sanctuary for Buddhism, the Sinhalese are the chosen people to superintend and perpetuate this position, and Tamils and other minorities live on the island thanks merely to Sinhalese Buddhist sufferance. This means that all rules, laws, conventions, and policies must be designed to promote Buddhism's superior standing and ensure its indefeasible status, Sri Lanka should never deviate from its unitary structure, and all who disagree with the above are enemies of the state (De-Votta 2007). Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have selectively used mytho-history and dubious and embellished accounts in texts like the *Mahavamsa* to justify their claims. While their arguments were initially made to rally Buddhists and stem colonialism's corrosive impact on the Buddhist faith, the same arguments were promoted to marginalise Tamils and other minorities in the post-independence era.

The present Mahinda Rajapaksa government and its allies are unabashed proponents of the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology. The success of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, or National Heritage Party) during the last parliamentary elections,<sup>10</sup> the relative popularity of the once Maoist and now hyper-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or People's Liberation Front), the rise of military leaders who subscribe to Sinhalese Buddhist domination, and the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa himself to the presidency and his popularity among Sinhalese Buddhists for seeking a military solution to the ethnic imbroglio all indicate

that the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology has triumphed. The ideology is partly yet conspicuously manifested in the demands to ban people converting to Christianity, violence against Christian houses of worship, threats against the Muslim community especially in the Eastern Province, hostility towards non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work in the north-east and document government malpractice, and the push to increase the Sinhalese population and colonise further the Northern and Eastern Provinces with Sinhalese Buddhists.<sup>11</sup> The latter has led to a policy of ethnic cleansing in slow motion, with Tamils displaced due to military operations not allowed to return to their homes and the military creating high security zones and economic zones with an eye to flooding the areas with Sinhalese Buddhists. It appears that the government plans to settle soldiers and their families in these north-eastern areas, thereby rewarding them for waging battle against the LTTE while also ensuring that these *ranawiruwas* (war heroes) will lord over the region's Tamils and Muslims. It also appears that rogue elements in the military, operating with the approval of persons close to the country's leadership but outside the chain of command, have been deployed as killer squads in the north-east to squash dissent and further Sinhalese Buddhist Lebensraum.

### **Divided Irreconcilably?**

As already noted, the Tamil rebellion that culminated in the LTTE's attempt to create a separate state was in reaction to the discriminatory policies the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology spawned. But the LTTE's quest for Eelam and the terrorist methods it adopted have calcified Sinhalese hostility toward Tamils, so that previously moderate Sinhalese too have now embraced extremist positions. This is manifested in the extant, almost palpable racism towards all Tamils, which the present Mahinda Rajapaksa government has promoted even as the president makes mollifying statements to hoodwink the international community. Indeed, the island is so divided that even Tamils who loathe the LTTE secretly derive satisfaction from the military's losses, while many Sinhalese react to the LTTE's defeats and Tamil civilian casualties with gloating Schadenfreude.

The demand for preserving the unitary structure of the state notwithstanding, it appears that many Sinhalese subconsciously consider the Northern Province especially to be alien territory. For instance, after LTTE airplanes conducted their first bombing operation a *Sunday Times* editorial said: "Not since that fateful Easter Sunday in second world war – 5 April 1942 – has Sri Lanka been bombed by air as happened last Sunday night" (*Sunday Times* online, 2007). This in a country where the state has been bombarding its own people in the north-east for over two decades. Besides Sudan, Sri Lanka is perhaps the only country in the world that uses the air force to bomb its own citizens, and the vast majority of Sinhalese do not seem troubled by this.<sup>12</sup>

Neither are the vast majority of Buddhists troubled by how the Mahinda Rajapaksa government has prosecuted the war against the LTTE without differentiating sufficiently between LTTE cadres and civilians. Indeed, the regime considers all Tamils potential terrorists or terrorist sympathisers and this explains the state's insouciant attitude and general hostility toward Tamils. Tamils

are increasingly treated as aliens and interlopers, not fellow citizens. Thus, when making recommendations to the All Party Representative Committee for Re-structuring the Sri Lankan State, the JHU claimed that "The true homeland of Tamils is... Tamil Nadu...in India...Hence Tamils are a 'nation' in Tamil Nadu but are only an ethnic minority community in Sri Lanka." The JHU's non-*bhikkhu* (Buddhist monk) parliamentarian and the present minister of environment could similarly note: "The Sinhalese are the only organic race of Sri Lanka. Other communities are all visitors to the country, whose arrival was never challenged out of the compassion of Buddhists. But they must not take this compassion for granted. The Muslims are here because our kings let them trade here and the Tamils because they were allowed to take refuge when the Moguls were invading them in India. What is happening today is pure ingratitude on the part of these visitors".<sup>13</sup> It hardly matters that Tamils have likely been present on the island since earliest times<sup>14</sup> while the Mughals ruled India from 1526-1858.

The sentiments voiced by the likes of the minister of environment are part of a nationalist narrative that combines jeremiad with chauvinism: Sri Lanka is *sinhadipa* and *dhammadipa* (island of the Sinhalese who are ennobled to preserve and protect Buddhism); the Sinhalese only have Sri Lanka while the island's other minorities have homelands elsewhere; Sri Lanka is surrounded by envious enemies who loathe the Sinhalese; those living across the Palk Straits in Tamil Nadu especially want to overtake the island; and NGOs, Christian missionaries, human rights groups, and various western powers and their organisations conspire to tarnish the image of the Sinhalese Buddhists and thereby assist the LTTE. Those who subscribe to this narrative are patriots; the rest are traitors. Such a dichotomy unsurprisingly promotes fecund racism.

Thus a JHU leader could claim that "There is a great conspiracy for the Tamils from the North to link with Tamils in the East, with the Indian Tamils in the estates and with the Tamils in Colombo and trap the Sinhalese on the island. Add to this the 50 or is it 70 million Tamils of South India (who) are all waiting to swim over".<sup>15</sup> And the feckless and fatuous former President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga could note that "The majority race should be safeguarded for the livelihood of the minority races. When the tree is safe, the vines can get entangled in it and grow".<sup>16</sup> President Rajapaksa and his advisers too have publicly stated that they have an obligation to honour the preferences of the Sinhalese Buddhists since this was the constituency that voted for Mahinda Rajapaksa and the SLFP. The country's army commander, whom the LTTE sought to assassinate in April 2006, could likewise say: "I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese. But there are minority communities and we treat them like our people".<sup>17</sup> Reiterating the most fundamental tenet of the nationalist ideology, he noted elsewhere that "This country will be ruled by the Sinhalese community which is the majority representing 74% of the population".<sup>18</sup> It is such arguments and warped logic that get used to justify a military solution to the ethnic conflict, prevent meaningful devolution for the north-east, and ensure Sinhalese Buddhist domination.

## Leaning towards Dictatorship

Sri Lanka at 60 has not only seen ethnocentrism and the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology triumph; it is also leaning towards a potential dictatorship. For President Mahinda Rajapaksa, together with his siblings and allies, have used the war against the LTTE to muzzle dissent, intimidate opponents, and create a political culture that promotes a Rajapaksa dynasty. What better way to do so than defeat the LTTE and claim to be protectors and preservers of the nation a la Dutugamunu (the second century BCE Sinhalese Buddhist king who defeated a reigning Tamil king and whose embellished and dissembled exploits have been used deftly by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment).

This narrative promoting the Rajapaksas is now being produced using rhetoric and varied imagery. The recent statement by the defence secretary (who is the president's brother) that a constitutional amendment should be introduced to ensure he continues as defence secretary irrespective of who succeeds Mahinda Rajapaksa, over 130 relatives from the Rajapaksa clan being provided influential state appointments and sinecures, nearly 80% of the country's budget being controlled by Mahinda Rajapaksa and his three siblings through their ministerial portfolios, and the president's attempts to prevent the Constitutional Council taking effect – which allows him to arbitrarily make top government appointments – are some signals that this regime intends to perpetuate its governance by hook or by crook. Thus, the strategy to corral the Eastern Province for Sinhalese and pro-government Tamil paramilitaries is not only designed to further Sinhalese Buddhist colonisation in these predominantly minority areas; it is also to ensure the votes of Tamils (who do not support the SLFP and loathe this particular government) can be "controlled" in future elections – especially during the next presidential election when Mahinda Rajapaksa seeks re-election.

The Rajapaksa government continues to claim that LTTE terrorism is the biggest threat facing Sri Lanka. It is correct, although this represents a short-term obstacle in that the LTTE, especially in light of recent reversals, cannot last as a potent military outfit indefinitely. Tamils in the diaspora have taken heart upon seeing Kosovo's self-proclaimed independence recognised by leading states, and they believe if the LTTE can hold out against the government's no-holds-barred military campaign the international community would have no choice but intervene more forcefully in Sri Lanka. But the Rajapaksa government is convinced that time is on its side and that the death of LTTE leaders, especially Vellupillai Prabhakaran, would cause the organisation to further splinter or completely crumble.

This means that the bigger (and long-term) danger facing Sri Lanka is the anti-democratic and illiberal forces currently holding sway and justifying their insidious practices by manipulating the war against the LTTE. Indeed, what is not been recognised sufficiently both domestically and abroad is that Sri Lanka is currently burdened with a predatory political elite that is murdering democracy to fight terrorism with the intention of consolidating and perpetuating their control of the state. Defeating terrorism is presented as a panacea, but the methods and mechanisms used to do so are bound to also be employed to consolidate

and perpetuate the rule of these predatory elite. The culture of impunity among the armed forces and the regime's minions, the rampant nepotism, favouritism, and corruption tolerated at the highest levels, the utter disregard for human rights, and the blatant assault against the independent media and the regime's opponents will continue even after Tamil militancy is defeated. The forces promoting such illiberalism and gangsterism would spread, become further emboldened and entrenched, and target the very Sinhalese who now tolerate such malpractices against minorities. Just like the UNP thugs who murdered and terrorised Tamils during the 1983 riots turned against Sinhalese Supreme Court justices, civil society activists, Buddhist monks, Catholic clergy, and the opposition's supporters when they challenged the Jayewardene regime, today's brown shirts could be used to browbeat fellow Sinhalese and perpetrate authoritarianism. This may be comeuppance for Sinhalese who have supported and tolerated the turn to ethnocentrism, but it would bode further ill for a post-civil war Sri Lanka.

## 'Blame Displacement'

Paul Brass, writing on Hindu-Muslim rioting in India, has chastised social scientists who in the post-rioting phase resort to "blame displacement", thereby diffusing responsibility for the riots and shielding those most culpable for perpetrating violence (Brass 2003). In Sri Lanka, too, many social scientists and academics, former ambassadors, and numerous others subscribe to such "blame displacement" and thereby seek to confuse, vitiate, and divert responsibility for the Rajapaksa regime's malpractices. Most of these persons pretend to be liberal, secular, and defenders of democracy. But their propaganda minimises the continuing state-sponsored discrimination against Tamils, overlooks the ham-handed behaviour of home guards, paramilitaries, and security forces that oppress and humiliate minorities, and justifies a military solution to the ethnic conflict by highlighting conveniently the LTTE's depravity. Some who resort to such "blame displacement" likely do so for ethnocentric and jingoistic reasons. Others, no doubt, operate instrumentally: they author paeans to the Rajapaksa brothers and top state officials in exchange for sinecures and vainglorious positions within government.<sup>19</sup> While they do have counterparts who oppose them, such counter-voices have been impotent in a milieu where an all-powerful president and government are notorious for intimidating and traducing contrarian positions.

The Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology requires a nemesis to stay relevant. A nemesis would also suit the Rajapaksas, who could use the attendant chaos to further their political designs. And all indications point to these nationalists taking on the country's Christians and Muslims once the LTTE threat is neutralised. These anti-Muslim and anti-Christian projects have already begun, and the periodic violence against Christian church houses and Muslims in the Eastern Province bear this out. For instance, recent mass emails vilify the Muslims – who are only around 8% of the population – for their supposed philoprogenitive urge and claim that Islamic fundamentalists, operating in cahoots with forces hostile to Sinhalese Buddhists, have plans to create a "Nasaristan" in the Eastern Province. The email encouraged

Sinhalese Buddhists to not sell land to Muslims and bar Sinhalese Buddhist women from associating with Muslim men.

It is clear that Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists have emulated tactics adopted by India's Hindutva forces. However, continued anti-Christian and anti-Muslim practices could potentially lead to the predominantly Christian west and Muslim states retaliating against the island. This would provide foreign Muslim radicals an opportunity to collaborate with latent Muslim fundamentalists in Sri Lanka. The LTTE, while anti-Buddhist, has eschewed projecting the quest for Eelam as part of a religious struggle, given that many Tamil Christians have played a leading role supporting the movement. But a defeated LTTE would create space for India's Hindutva forces to collaborate with Sri Lanka's Hindus and further complicate the island's ethno-religious divisions. In short, irrespective of whether the LTTE is fully defeated or not, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism stands to create more carnage among the island's minorities. It is debatable as to how the island's present "blame displacement" sycophants would respond to sustained clashes against Muslims and Christians. Whatever their reactions, they have already fattened the beast that stands to create more mayhem in an already battered Sri Lanka.

### **Conclusions**

When Sri Lanka commemorated Independence Day in 1956 Tamils in the north-east flew black flags to bemoan the impending Sinhala-only milieu. That practice continued for many years

and only ended when the military began retaliating with impunity. Most Tamils long stopped voluntarily respecting the country's flag (itself a hegemonic Sinhalese symbol) and hardly no Tamil today sings the national anthem. In short, Tamils have eschewed such symbols of nationhood because they represent ethnocentrism, not the egalitarianism and dispassionate governance all minorities aspired to at independence.

If the price Sri Lanka has paid for ethnocentrism is civil war, the war reinforces ethnocentrism. To use one loathsome example, the Mahinda Rajapaksa government is quick to compensate Sinhalese civilians killed due to LTTE terrorism, even going to the extent of conducting mass funerals for propaganda purposes, but innocent Tamils killed due to military operations are completely disregarded. Likewise, soldiers who have resorted to the rape and murder of Tamil civilians are never taken to task even after some get identified. On the contrary, such personnel are promoted and feted as ranawiruwas. Such is the ethnocentric legacy Sri Lanka celebrates at 60 years of independence.

Sixty years of independence has led to over 98% of the Sri Lankan military being Sinhalese, over 95% of the public service being Sinhalese, and Tamils being forced to operate in Sinhala at police stations, hospitals, court houses, and bureaucracies, among numerous other injustices and humiliations. Despite Tamil now being an "official" language, Tamils living in the south are even forced to see their births and deaths registered in Sinhala, a language the vast majority of them do not read or write.

Indeed, many Tamils living in the south have taken neutral names and give their children neutral or Sinhala names so as to avoid being targeted. The ethnocentric policies successive governments pursued are responsible for such marginalisation of Tamils and Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy.

Sri Lanka began 2008 with member of parliament, T Maheswaram being murdered on New Year's Day; and the event heralded one of the most violent years in the post-independence period. The country embraced 2009 with its biggest private television station being attacked by 20 goons armed with assault rifles, grenades, and pistols, causing nearly \$2 million in damage. Two days later the island's most intrepid journalist, Lasantha Wickrematunga who relentlessly uncovered corruption within the government and military and campaigned consistently against ethnocentric and racist politics, was brazenly murdered on a crowded street. Assassination squads connected

to the military are being blamed for both attacks, which coincided with a string of LTTE defeats that could likely lead to the group's demise. Assaults against the independent media, however, have been a feature of the Mahinda Rajapaksa government. For instance, on average the non-state media have been attacked or intimidated once every four days over the past three years, so that over a dozen journalists have been killed, another 20 have fled the island after receiving death threats, and those criticising the government and military have been forced to suspend their columns or resort to self-censorship. It is hardly any wonder that Sri Lanka today enjoys the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous country for journalists – after Iraq! Together with the island's sorry plight on nearly every measure pertaining to good governance, it highlights why Sri Lanka after 60 years of independence represents a degenerate state.

#### NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Concluding Statement by the United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali of the United Nations Congress on Public International Law: Towards the Twenty-First Century: International Law as a Language for International Relations, 13-17 March 1995, New York, Documents, p 9.
- 2 By political decay I refer to a situation where the individuals and institutions representing the state function in a corrupt, partial, and violent manner whereby they jettison the norms, values, and practices that ensure liberal democracy, operate with impunity, engender anomie, and undermine citizens' confidence in the state.
- 3 Illiberalism ensues when a state fails to ensure limited government; free and fair elections; the rule of law; freedom of assembly, speech, and religion; and, in the case of a polyethnic society, ethnic accommodation as opposed to ethnic superordination and violence – often as a way to increase and perpetuate power.
- 4 Numerous terms are used to identify democracies that combine purportedly liberal practices with authoritarian governance, and these include "illiberal democracy," "electoral democracy," "virtual democracy," and "pseudodemocracy". I refer to Sri Lanka as both an "ethnocentric democracy" and an "illiberal democracy" to emphasise how the country's politics have undermined ethnic cohabitation and marginalised the principal minority group, the Sri Lankan Tamils.
- 5 An ethnoocracy may be defined as a polyethnic state where power is wielded by and for the majority community, often at the expense of dispassionate governance towards minorities. The term is apt when describing Sri Lanka, given that it has long been governed by the Sinhalese Buddhists for the Sinhalese Buddhists, with minorities treated as "guests" tolerated thanks to Sinhalese Buddhist sufferance.
- 6 *Thera* is the term used to denote Buddhist monks who have served as clergy for 10 or more years.
- 7 See, for instance, Sivalingam (1991).
- 8 Most of these Indian Tamils were resettled in India as part of two agreements between the two countries.
- 9 Tamil Nadu's politicians pressured the central government to intervene in Sri Lanka, but President J R Jayewardene's pro-western foreign policies that disregarded India's strategic interests were what influenced Indira Gandhi and the Research and Analysis Wing to train and arm Tamil rebels seeking to secede from Sri Lanka.
- 10 The party's parliamentary candidates consisted of only Buddhist monks and it won nine seats in the April 2004 elections. The party recently had a lay member appointed the minister of environment. Many feel the JHU's controversial members have further tarnished the image of the Buddhist monk, and the party is unlikely to enjoy similar success in the next election. See DeVotta and Stone (2008).
- 11 For details see DeVotta (2007).
- 12 The vast majority of Tamils in Tamil Nadu turned hostile toward the LTTE after the group murdered Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991. The indiscriminate bombing and culture of impunity in the north-east especially under the Mahinda Rajapaksa government are major reasons for these Tamils now re-evaluating their opposition toward the LTTE, notwithstanding India having banned the organisation. This not only impacts upon Tamil Nadu politics but also effects relations between Tamil Nadu and the Indian central government and India and Sri Lanka.
- 13 *Daily Mirror*, "South India Has No Moral Right to Criticise the War", 16 October 2008, at <http://www.dailymirror.lk/DM-BLOG/Sections/frmNewsDetail.aspx?ARTID=29441> Accessed on 17 October 2008.
- 14 It would seem that if people from south-east Asia could have migrated to Australia 35,000-40,000 years ago, south Indians, who on a clear day could see Sri Lanka across the shallow Palk Strait, must have investigated the island from at least the time they took to catamarans.
- 15 Quoted in Gunasekara (2007).
- 16 Quoted in *Sunday Leader*, "Fonnie Plays the Green Card", 5 October 2008, at <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/20081005/editorial.htm>. Accessed on 10 October 2008.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Quoted in *Daily News*, "Beginning of the End of the Battle – Army Chief", 19 July 2008, at <http://www.dailynews.lk/2008/07/19/feao1.asp>. Accessed on 21 July 2008.
- 19 Such persons are assisted by the plethora of foreign scholars who have made careers working on Sri Lanka but who for whatever reason – perhaps a fear that Sinhalese and Tamils would not cooperate with their research endeavours if they spoke out against a particular side, the government would not grant them visas if they criticised it, or lacking fundamental principle and courage – refuse to speak out against the terrorism perpetrated by the LTTE and Sri Lankan government. If the locals who resort to blame displacement are being mercenary, instrumental, and opportunistic, these foreign scholars come across being parasitic.

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