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**Sri Lanka:
Civil War along
Ethnoreligious Lines**

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Abstract

This case study addresses the underlying ethnic and religious tensions behind the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), a conflict led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on behalf of the Hindu Tamil minority against the Sri Lankan government and the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. The core text of the case study investigates four main questions: What are the historical origins of the conflict in Sri Lanka? How were domestic religious forces and identities involved? How important were international religious and political forces? What role did socioeconomic factors play? In addition to the core text, the case study also includes a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant religious organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and government organizations, and a list of recommended further readings.

About this Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

During Sri Lanka's long civil war (1983-2009), religion was an important part of the collective identity and social narrative of many participants. Though the war was not strictly a religious conflict, the identity cleavage, Tamil (Hindu) versus Sinhalese (Buddhist), was central to understanding the war. The close link between religion and ethnic identity made religious targets particularly appealing for symbolic violence, not against faith per se, but against symbols representing the opposing side: worshippers, clerics, and houses of worship. Seeds of the conflict were sown following independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, soon after which the new government of the Sinhalese-dominated United National Party disenfranchised Tamil plantation workers; the Sinhalese majority stoked more antagonism when it made

Sinhala, rather than ethnic-neutral English, the national language in 1956, and promoted policies that further disenfranchised the Tamil minority. Over time, some militant Buddhist monks were in the vanguard of Sinhalese nationalism, including winning seats in parliament. In short, the promotion of Sinhalese identity—religion, culture, and language—was a driving force for Tamil grievances, and the nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) responded with terrorism and insurgency. After a quarter century of violence, Colombo decisively beat the LTTE on the battlefield in May 2009, killing its senior leaders. However, at this writing it remains unclear whether the Sri Lankan government is on a course that will ameliorate, rather than exacerbate, long-standing tensions.



Temple of the Tooth, Kandy

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE began in the late 1970s and flowed from disintegrating communal relations following independence from British rule. In addition to disenfranchising a large number of Tamils upon independence in 1948 and making Sinhala the island's official language in 1956, the government adopted a new constitution in 1972 that gave priority to Buddhism (without making it an official state religion), changed the island's name from Ceylon to Sri Lanka (the Sinhalese name for the country), and gave constitutional protection to Sinhala as the official language. Tensions erupted in armed conflict in 1983, with the Black July riots that claimed the lives of thousands while the secular-nationalist LTTE launched attacks claiming both military and civilian lives. By the mid-1980s, the LTTE gained control of the northern, Hindu-majority portion of the island (the Jaffna Peninsula), and eliminated rivals within the Tamil community. In 1987, India mediated a peace agreement on the island and agreed to deploy thousands of troops to keep the peace. However, the LTTE never accepted the agreement, and large-scale fighting soon broke out between the LTTE and the Indian military. The Indian military suffered heavy casualties and began to fall out of favor with both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Indian forces withdrew in 1990, and in 1991 the LTTE assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the architect of the Indian military presence in Sri Lanka.

One of the hallmarks of this war was its civilian cost. Often, the LTTE and paramilitary groups directly targeted civilians; at times, religious sites were easy targets for attack. For example, the LTTE massacred 146 Buddhists at prayer in Anuradhapura in 1985, bombed the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth in 1998, and expelled over 75,000 Muslims from their homes in 1990. Thousands more—of multiple

religious affiliations—fled their homes in the ensuing decades. Furthermore, thousands of Tamils were killed by Sinhalese riots and paramilitary organizations, including anti-LTTE Tamil paramilitaries supported by the Sri Lankan army. Hindu priests were targets of both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army. Some Buddhist monks were among the most vocal opponents of compromise within the Tamil community. For example, monks took to the streets to protest Norway's mediation of the conflict leading to a 2002 ceasefire between the LTTE and the government.

Sri Lanka descended into the most brutal phase of the civil war after Indian withdrawal in 1991. Government forces embargoed the Jaffna Peninsula and bombarded LTTE forces. The LTTE retaliated with strikes on military and civilian targets, including the massacre of hundreds of Muslims at prayer. Sinhalese paramilitary forces retaliated against Tamils, killing thousands. Hopes rose for a negotiated settlement in 2000 when the LTTE and the government entered talks with mediation from Norway. This culminated in a joint ceasefire in 2002, an exchange of prisoners between both sides, and hope that the war was at an end. While the ceasefire technically held until 2008, the situation deteriorated significantly over time. Several thousand civilians were killed during the ceasefire—predominantly by LTTE operatives but also some by the Sri Lankan army—and the Sri Lankan government rededicated itself to a military solution to the conflict. The LTTE became internally divided and withdrew from further peace talks. Government forces won victories over the LTTE, particularly in the Eastern Province, and killed the senior LTTE leadership in May 2009, claiming an end to the conflict and the advent of peace. While precise casualty figures do not exist, it is estimated that as many as 100,000 died during the three-decade-long conflict.

DOMESTIC FACTORS

Historically, most Sri Lankans respected the religious traditions of their neighbors; for many citizens that continues today. However, religion's role in the contemporary Sri Lankan conflict is rooted in Buddhist nationalism that began in the nineteenth century when Sinhalese Buddhist revivalist Anagarika Dharmapala popularized the link between Buddhism and Sinhalese nationalism rooted in the ancient history of the island and reflected in the national chronicle Mahavamsa, written 1,500 years ago. Over time, the institutionalized body of Buddhist monks—the sangha—became a crucial power center, but one with ambivalent attitudes toward political participation. On the one hand, Buddhism often preaches nonviolence and withdrawal from social life; many Buddhist monks attempt to transcend this world and are apolitical. On the other hand, however, there has often been a close association between Buddhism and royal or political power in Asia. In the case of Sri Lanka, Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalism was an anticolonial voice against Great Britain.

This ambivalence about political participation was characteristic of mid-twentieth century Sri Lanka. In the late 1940s, a younger generation of monks began to assert themselves in political debates, sometimes on behalf of leftist labor causes, but increasingly on the side of Sinhalese nationalism. As Great Britain retreated from the Indian subcontinent, new countries were born (ultimately Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka) and this was the context in which vibrant Sinhalese nationalism took shape.

Political currents dramatically shifted in 1956 when national elections brought nationalists to power, resulting in a shift from English to Sinhalese as the official state language. This had immediate ramifications for schooling (all instruction to be in Sinhala) and the ability to get a government job or ac-



Temple on the way to the summit of Adam's Peak (Sri Pada)

cess government services (all in Sinhala). Ethnic riots erupted in 1956 and 1958, a cycle that would continue until major conflict broke out in the early 1980s. Some voices from the sangha called for restraint and cooperation, while others took a more aggressive, triumphalist tone. The LTTE and its predecessors returned much of this aggressive tone.

Consequently, Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms differ: Buddhism was crucial to the Sinhalese whereas language was considered paramount to Tamil survival. Indeed, for the secularist LTTE, religion was not a primary motivator or source of identity. Of course, neither side was monolithic. Over time, portions of the Tamil and Sinhalese populations sought settlement, but extremists manipulated fears and ethnic pride to thwart compromise. In addition to the primary cleavage along ethnoreligious lines, minorities such as Christians and Muslims often identified with those of the same ethnicity (Tamil or Sinhalese). This link between religion and ethnic identity made religious targets such as churches, mosques, and temples particularly appealing for symbolic violence.

INTERNATIONAL FACTORS

The Portuguese first visited Sri Lanka in 1505, and thus its Christian community has long been Roman Catholic. The Portuguese, Dutch, and later British all made use of the country then known as Ceylon as a critical link in East-West trade. The British employed Indian Tamils to work farms in southern Sri Lanka, explaining the distinction and sometimes animosity between Sri Lankan Tamils, concentrated in the North and East, and Indian Tamils, concentrated in the South. Nonetheless, upon British withdrawal, the roles of Europeans immediately diminished.

Following independence, Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority became wary of the tens of millions of Tamil Hindus living just 20 miles off the Jaffna Peninsula in mainland India. India's role in the conflict from its early stages has not entirely alleviated these fears. After anti-Tamil riots in 1983, the Indian government provided support to the growing Tamil rebel movement for domestic and geopolitical reasons, including as a means of protecting its ethnic compatriots in Sri Lanka. India distanced itself from the Tamil fighters in the late 1980s and eventually sent its own troops to Sri Lanka to enforce a peace agreement. However, this backfired: the Tamil LTTE attacked Indian troops and the peacekeepers stoked Sinhalese fears that India would eventually come to control Sri Lanka. In 1989, Sri Lankan leaders ordered Indian troops to leave; in 1991, India's prime minister was assassinated by an LTTE affiliate. Following withdrawal, India has supported peace negotiation efforts but has avoided direct mediation between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka.

International Christian organizations provided humanitarian assistance at various points of the conflict. Although there are numerous Sinhalese Christians, Christianity has a tense relationship with more militant members of the Sinhalese community, who fear that missionaries will convert Buddhists and dilute the purity of Sinhalese religious identity. Particularly, the

Catholic Church (which accounts for most Sri Lankan Christians) has a chilly history with Buddhist nationalists due to the Church's roots in Western trade and colonialism. Buddhist nationalists even used this fear to suggest that the Norwegian-mediated peace process (2000-2002) was a tool of Christian control.

The international Buddhist community played a limited role in the Sri Lankan conflict due to the ambivalence of Buddhism to political action in many communities. Furthermore, Sinhalese Buddhism relies heavily on a nationally distinct text, the Mahavamsa, and Buddhist nationalists focus on preserving their Sinhalese island nation from external threats more than participating in an international Buddhist community.



Cathedral of St. Mary, Galle

RELIGION AND SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Sri Lanka's religious demographics are contested, and due to inaccessibility of areas formerly under the control of Tamil rebels, official census results do not exist for the entire island. Estimates generally state that Sinhalese Buddhists make up approximately 74 percent of the national population. The Tamil minority is actually divided ethnically between Tamils of Sri Lankan descent (4 to 12 percent) and Tamils of Indian descent, who were brought from the mainland to work on plantations during British rule. The Indian Tamil estimate is likely accurate because this ethnic group lives primarily in regions of the country under government control. The Sri Lankan Tamil estimate is more disputed because it is unknown how many may have fled the country since hostilities broke out between the LTTE and the government in 1983.

While Buddhists and Hindus make up the vast majority of Sri Lanka's population of 20 million, there are significant Muslim and Christian populations, which reflect Sri Lanka's long history of international trade and colonial rule. Muslims and Christians each make up approximately 7 percent of Sri Lanka's population, with many Christians living in areas previously under LTTE control and with strong ties to Tiger rebels.

Two additional trends in demographics are important to consider when analyzing the role of religion in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. First, Sri Lanka is a case of a "double minority." Tamils are a minority on the island as a whole, and feel threatened by Sinhalese dominance in the government and the exclusivist ethnic, linguistic, and religious character of Sinhalese nationalism. The desire for self-determination reflects the belief that only within a regionally devolved or federal government can Tamils hope to control any of the governmental structures. At the same time, the Sinhalese community, while a majority on the island, perceives

ethnic threat in the massive Tamil-Hindu communities of South India, particularly the 54 million Tamils living in Tamil Nadu, just off Sri Lanka's northwest coast. Hence, the government of Sri Lanka has explicitly tried to alter population patterns on the island. From independence through the 1960s, resettlement packages encouraged Sinhalese to move to the east of Sri Lanka, into territory that had previously been dominated by Tamils. This policy advanced to such a point that political redistricting could create the Ampara district from land once included in the Tamil Batticaloa district. The Eastern Province was hotly contested by government and Tamil rebel forces until won by the former in 2008; Muslims make up almost a third of its population.

Somewhat surprisingly, nearly a quarter century of civil conflict has not destroyed the Sri Lankan economy, though it did weaken it. Since the ceasefire of 2002, the economy has grown at an impressive rate but has slowed recently, dropping from a 6.8 percent real GDP growth rate in 2007 to 3.5 percent in 2009. Lower growth before the ceasefire agreement drove high unemployment, as high as 20 percent in 1992. However, fighting in the densely populated Jaffna Peninsula frustrated efforts at economic development, with severe consequences for the local populace. LTTE leaders did not guarantee the safe passage of government aid shipments and used local populations as shields for its guerrilla activities.

Nonetheless, Sri Lanka is one of the regional bright spots for human development despite the violent conflict. The UN's 2010 Human Development Index ranks Sri Lanka ninety-first, well ahead of India (119) and Bangladesh (129). Despite the conflict, life expectancy at birth is 74.4 years and it has an adult literacy rate of 90.8 percent that is closely tied to the intense focus on education from the

government since independence from British rule, including free public education from kindergarten through university. This reflects the open, universalistic nature of traditional Buddhist education as opposed to the traditional, caste-based, restricted literacy among Hindus.

In conclusion, Sri Lanka's bloody civil war was an ethnonationalist insurgency wherein various communities defined themselves and their antagonists by ethnicity and faith tradition. The LTTE was primarily a secular, nationalist movement that became increasingly brutal over time; the government tended to align and define itself solely in terms of Sinhalese nationalism, for which defense of Buddhist heritage and identity are important obligations.

The conflict was made more complicated by the presence of Muslims and Christians who were often caught in the crossfire, and, most importantly, the looming potential of Hindu-dominant India to exert influence over Sinhalese affairs. External voices had little long term impact on the conflict, which ended in a classic battlefield defeat for the LTTE, allowing the government almost free reign to impose a post-war order of its choosing. Although undoubtedly the life of the population, including most Tamils, is better now that the war is over, many of the longstanding grievances have not been fully addressed. Furthermore, Colombo faces international scrutiny for its sometimes heavy-handed tactics, despite the fact that the war is over.



Colombo

KEY EVENTS

1956 Social Revolution

The elections of 1956 resulted in government assistance provided to religious groups under a Ministry of Cultural Affairs (and accepted by Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus), and also the empowerment a Sinhalese nationalist coalition that institutionalized Buddhism's role in Sri Lankan society and stoked sectarian riots. Buddhist monks played a leading role in election debates, with the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna (EBP, "United Front of Monks") forming as an activist organization demanding policies favorable to Sinhala Buddhists. The EBP conducted extensive "get out the vote" operations for the victorious Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP, "People's United Front") coalition, a leftist-leaning group of parties that pledged to reduce colonial inequalities that had persisted after independence and restore and protect Buddhist and Sinhalese culture. Among its slogans was "A vote for the MEP is a vote for the Buddhists." The first piece of legislation passed by the MEP government clarified that Sinhalese would be the only official language of Sri Lanka. Although the medium of instruction continued to be one's native language (i.e. Tamil for Tamils), this decision impacted both the educational and employment systems to the exclusion of the Tamil community due to the abandonment of English. Riots followed in 1956 and returned in 1958.

1983 Black July Riots

In July 1983, Sri Lanka's simmering communal tensions boiled over into widespread violence. The anti-Tamil riots were, in part, a response to the ambush and deaths of 15 Sri Lankan soldiers by the LTTE. However, organized Sinhalese mobs responded to the LTTE operation with anti-Tamil rampages that overwhelmed the slow-moving efforts of the government

to contain them. Approximately 1,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the rioting, and tens of thousands fled to homogeneous Tamil areas or left the country entirely. The LTTE consolidated its control over the Tamil community (particularly the Jaffna Peninsula) and stepped up operations against government forces in the following years.

1990 Muslim Massacre

Muslims have frequently been caught in the middle of the largely Tamil-Sinhalese conflict. In 1990, tensions between the LTTE and Muslim leaders arose, and the LTTE expelled all Muslims living in the Northern Province. The tension arose from disputes over identity and representation: the LTTE considers Muslims to be Tamil, whereas Muslims insist on a separate ethnic identity and independent political representation. Approximately 28,000 Muslims were expelled from Jaffna on a single day (October 30) and over 45,000 were expelled in total from LTTE-controlled areas. In other notable incidents, the LTTE massacred more than 100 Muslims at prayer in Kattankudy. Muslim interest groups have formed in response to these attacks (notably the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress), but still struggle to have their voices heard in negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government.

1998 Temple of the Tooth Bombing

The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy is one of Buddhism's most holy sites and, more importantly to the LTTE, the symbolic center of the Sinhalese state. It is home to a sacred relic (a tooth of the Buddha), and attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year. In 1998, the LTTE drove a truck full of explosives into a group of pilgrims in front of the temple, killing eight people. The attack came just days before the United

Kingdom's Prince Charles was scheduled to visit the site as part of the celebrations around the fiftieth anniversary of Sri Lankan independence. The bombing touched off anti-Tamil rioting in Kandy and elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

2002 Ceasefire Agreement

On February 22, 2002, the LTTE agreed to a full ceasefire agreement with the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE retained control of large areas of northern Sri Lanka as a result of this agreement and continued to operate as a quasi-government, though provided few services to residents. Norwegian mediation played a key role in the negotiation process, while war fatigue in both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities opened up space for accommodation. Hardline Buddhist monks were suspicious of the agreement from the beginning, worrying that it would open the door to recognition of the LTTE and segregation of the island. Follow-up negotiations quickly stalled as small ceasefire violations stoked tensions to such a point that final-status political negotiations over devo-

lution could not take place. The ceasefire technically held until 2008, but over 3,000 were killed in the interim, particularly after 2005.

2004 Tsunami Impact

The tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia in December 2004 was a massive disaster in Sri Lanka. The World Bank estimates that 35,000 people died and 130,000 homes were destroyed in a country of 20 million people. The areas most effected by the wave and floods were in the northeast of the country, areas either controlled by the LTTE or areas in which the LTTE and the government actively competed for control. While an initial agreement between the LTTE and the government facilitated the distribution of humanitarian assistance, the situation quickly devolved as local factions sought to build their power over areas impacted by the storm. Aid distribution in the northeast of the island lagged far behind relief efforts in more secure areas, and was nearly impossible when hostilities escalated in the region.



Local residents survey tsunami damage

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Nikaya Hierarchies (Buddhist)

It is estimated that there are 30,000 Buddhist monks on the island of Sri Lanka. The Buddhist sangha is technically made up of three major divisions, or nikayas, in Sri Lanka. These are (in descending order of size) the Siyam Nikaya, the Amarapura Nikaya, and the Ramanna Nikaya. The Siyam Nikaya is caste-exclusive and retains the prestigious custodianship of the Temple of the Tooth. Each nikaya is led by an individual cleric called the mahanayaka. These individuals exercise varying influence on Sri Lankan society, but are relatively removed from day-to-day political life. All have expressed disapproval of the more overt political activism of younger Buddhist monks. The leaders of the nikayas do work together from time to time, but there is no organizational unity across the entire sangha.

Cross-nikaya Organizations (Buddhist)

While the nikayas retain their official leadership of the Buddhist community, much of the political activity from Sri Lanka's monks takes place through organizations that draw from across the nikayas and are independent of the nikaya leaderships. Such organizations include the Jathika Hela Urumaya, a monk-led hardline political party that put nine members in Sri Lanka's parliament. Other such organizations include the National Sangha Council (Jathika Sangha Sabhava), which took a more accommodating stance to the Norwegian peace process. Another organization, the Jathika Sangha Sammelanaya, explicitly rejected any negotiations with the LTTE. These organizations are highly vocal in political debates but lack some of the legitimacy of the more senior mahanayakas.

Hindu

While the LTTE was the dominant force in the Tamil

community, it is not a religious organization and it came into conflict with members of the Hindu priesthood who occasionally challenged its rule. Because of the LTTE's position of power until very recently, other institutional presences are limited, such as the small All Ceylon Hindu Conference that proposes candidates for elections. A large network of schools and colleges serves the Hindu community, both in Colombo and in former LTTE territory in the Jaffna Peninsula. There are numerous Hindu temples in Sri Lanka, although many have been damaged by the war. In April 2007, a Hindu chief priest was killed in a firefight with the Sri Lankan navy, and in May another was arrested amid allegations of connections to bomb-making materials. Katirkamam Temple (Kataragama in Sinhala) is uniquely notable for being a particularly holy site for Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Muslim

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka traces its roots to traders who arrived more than a thousand years ago. 93 percent of Muslims are known as Moors, descendants from this early trading community. The Sri Lankan Muslim Congress is the main representative organization, both a religious interest group and a political party with representation in Sri Lanka's parliament. It is led by Rauf Hakeem, and it attempts to protect Muslims living both under the control of the Sri Lankan government and in formerly LTTE-controlled territory. The SLMC's founder, M. H. M. Ashraff, was killed in a helicopter crash in 2001 after withdrawing his support for the governing coalition in Colombo. Other Muslim religious organizations include the Muslim Theologians Association and the All Mosques Federation.

Christian

The Christian community is predominately made up of Roman Catholics (population 1.4 million), who are represented by the Sri Lankan Catholic hierarchy. The Catholic Church has a tense history of relations with the Buddhist community, largely because of its institutional ties in the Portuguese colonization of the island as well as anti-Buddhist activities during the British colonial period. Catholics come from both the Tamil and Sinhalese

communities and have tended to side with their ethnolinguistic compatriots in the island's civil war. The National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL) represents a number of the other Christian denominations on the island, and has been an active presence in peacebuilding efforts. Christians of all denominations have suffered occasional attacks at the hands of both Tamil militants and Sinhalese-Buddhist mobs.



Golden Temple, Dambulla

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Peace Council

<http://peace-srilanka.org/>

The National Peace Council (NPC) of Sri Lanka was established in 1995 as an independent, impartial NGO dedicated to building peace through cross-community training and dialogue. NPC's leadership comes from all of Sri Lanka's largest faith traditions, enabling the group to garner diverse public interest for peace. NPC's programming includes youth peace education, a mobilization unit designed to build political will for peace, a research and analysis unit that provides resources on the course of the conflict, and a program specifically dedicated to promoting the role of women in peace and public life.

Center for Policy Alternatives

<http://www.cpalanka.org/>

The Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA) is a major non-partisan research institute that generates reports on a wide range of policy matters relating to the Sri Lankan Civil War. CPA's annual social indicator polling provides a wide array of data on public attitudes towards conflict and ethnic diversity in Sri Lanka. Its conflict and peace analysis unit assessed religion's impact on various aspects of the conflict, and its legal and constitutional unit considers many of the development challenges facing domestic and international agencies in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.

World Council of Religions for Peace: Sri Lanka Summits

<http://religionsforpeace.org>

From December 14 to 16, 2007, the World Council of Religions for Peace hosted an interfaith peace summit in Jaffna. A variety of national and international leaders attended the summit, including those representing Sri Lankan Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Leaders held the meeting in the LTTE-controlled northern part of the country after a similar meeting in Colombo in June. This series of summit meetings came at a particularly sensitive time, when both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government seemed determined to end 2002's ceasefire and attempt to settle the civil war by military means.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the historical origins of the conflict in Sri Lanka?
2. How were domestic religious forces and identities involved?
3. How important are international religious and political forces?
4. What role have socioeconomic factors played?