

DOES THE END OF THE CEASE-FIRE LEAVE ANY PROSPECT FOR PEACE IN SRI LANKA?

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1. Introduction

On Wednesday, January 2, the Sri Lanka government renounced the cease-fire agreement concluded on February 22, 2002 with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) thanks to Norwegian mediation.¹ The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM – the inspection team monitoring the agreement) subsequently put an end to its activities on January 16, the official date of the resumption of hostilities². Nearly six years after its implementation, one has to say that the cease-fire never succeeded in putting in place a lasting peace in the country, which has been torn apart by 25 years of civil war. In July 2006, the Sri Lanka Army had already launched a vast offensive aiming at driving the Tamil Tigers from their strongholds in the East of the country. The fighting continued ever since in an intermittent manner without any of the parties officially renouncing the cease-fire out of fear of assuming responsibility before the international community.

It was a series of suicide attacks perpetrated in the course of 2007 that offered the government the chance to announce resumption of the war while laying responsibility at the door of the LTTE. The death of four soldiers in the explosion of a bomb near a bus passing in the centre of Colombo served as the justification³. This decision nonetheless aroused the consternation of the diplomatic community in Colombo, which fears that the country may fall into the state of chaos it was in ten years ago. The official end of the cease-fire was marked by an attack carried out against a bus, causing the death of 23 civilians in Buttala, 240 km southeast of Colombo⁴.

In these pages we will try to trace the history of the conflict and to explain its deeper causes. We will analyse the manner in which the two camps make use of the identity and the religion of the various Sri Lanka communities to justify the war. After speaking about the atrocities

¹ 'Government takes a policy decision to abrogate failed CFA,' Ministry Of Defence, public, security, law and order, 02/01/2008.

² SLMM Statement, 03/01/2008.

³ 'Sri Lanka/Terrorism: the Sri Lanka Army targeted by an attack in the heart of Colombo.' ESISC, 02/01/2007.

⁴ 'Sri Lanka/Terrorism: a murderous attack marks the official end of the cease-fire.' ESISC, 16/01/2007.

committed by one or the other sides and the efforts made by the international community to re-establish peace, we will try to see if the resumption of total war leaves any prospect for settling a conflict that has caused more than 70,000 deaths and forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to leave their homes and seek exile.

2. The historical context: from independence to civil war

A former British Crown colony, the island of Ceylon obtained its independence on February 4, 1948 without any true struggle. From this time on, the new political structures put in place in Colombo encouraged the rising tensions between the various ethnic components of the country, principally the Sinhala and the Tamils. On the basis of the historical and religious past that was re-examined, nationalist parties were created from scratch during the 1930s. By citing Buddhist texts dating from the 5th century, the Sinhala were able to claim exclusive possession of the island.⁵ From the Tamil side, the nationalists put forward the history of the ancient Hindu kingdom of Jaffna, master of the North of the island in the 13th century⁶. After independence, the confrontation of these two nationalisms resulted in tensions that culminated in the adoption of Sinhala as the sole national language in 1956. Compromises later negotiated between the two communities were never given concrete form, and in 1972 the Sinhala majority obtained under the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike the change of the name of Ceylon into the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka⁷.

Thus, as we see, ethnic and religious rivalries have influenced Sri Lanka politics ever since independence. However, it was economic problems that were the source of the first violence. In 1948, the foundation of the Sri Lanka economy was healthy. The country enjoyed revenue from production of coconuts, rubber, coffee and tea, all part of the British heritage. Initially invested in education and public health, this income made it possible to maintain demographic growth. Beginning at a certain point, the increase in the population and poor management of the resources led, however, to a shortage of jobs and a social crisis. In the North of the country, the predominantly Tamil regions, this crisis led to the outbreak of conflict between the majority of the population and its elites, who were well educated and close to the government in Colombo. At the same time, the plans for territorial development of the North threatened to overturn the equilibrium in landowning⁸ and created a great deal of resentment. This gave rise to many Marxist or Maoist movements, from which emerged the LTTE, founded in 1976 by Velupillai Pirabhakaran⁹.

In the centre and South of the country, similar economic problems prompted the birth of an extreme leftist armed Sinhala movement, the Janata Vimkuthi Peramuna (JVP – People's Liberation Front), created in 1965¹⁰. Facing this threat, the government adopted laws reserving exclusive advantages for the Sinhala. The social tensions then took an ethnic character, all of which was responsible for the rising violence of the 1970s. In July 1983, anti-Tamil riots in Colombo followed the discovery of the bodies of thirteen Sri Lanka soldiers in the Jaffna Peninsula.¹¹ In reaction, the LTTE and other Tamil movements unleashed a civil war to win the creation of an independent Tamil state. However, the LTTE moved away from its original claims and adopted a cult of personality. It abandoned class struggle in favour of a racial ideology. The tiger symbol follows thus from the medieval Indian empire of Chola, the

⁵ Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, Chandra Richard De Silva (dir.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, State University of New-York Press, 1998.

⁶ A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism: Its Origins and Development in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 1999, p.14.

⁷ Deborah Winslow & Michael D. Woost (eds.), *Economy, Culture, and Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Indiana university Press, 2004, p.6.

⁸ Jonathan Spencer (dir.), *Sri Lanka History and the Roots of Conflict*, Routledge, 1990, p. 1

⁹ Jean-Marc Balencie & Arnaud de la Grange, *Les nouveaux mondes rebelles*, Michalon, 2005, p.375

¹⁰ Ibid., Jonathan Spencer p. 19.

¹¹ Ibid., Jean-Marc Balencie & Arnaud de la Grange, p.371.

apogee of Tamil culture. Veneration of violence was inspired by the national Dravidian Movement which was created in Tamil Nadu in the 1950s. This movement revered the martial culture of the military castes in the South of India, which exalted martyrdom and revenge¹².

3. At the root of the conflict: the building of a national ideology

As we have seen, national identity and religion play a considerable role in the Sri Lanka conflict. Indeed, the nationalists of each community interpret historical traditions and ancient texts so as to present the other side as being the age-old enemy. Furthermore, each side plays on the anxiety of minorities: the Tamil and Hindu minority in Sri Lanka versus the Sinhala and Buddhist minority of the all Hindu world. The two camps play on the feeling of being besieged in order to justify a war that is presented as defensive. That explains in particular the support provided by the Buddhist clergy to the military operations conducted by the Sri Lanka government, which is the defender of the religion against Hinduism. Lastly, the confrontation of these two religious nationalisms should not obscure the existence of other communities, including Muslims, Christians and the 'Tamil Indians' or 'Hill country Tamils,' populations which were originally living in India and were brought over in the colonial period to work in the plantations of Ceylon¹³.

a. The Sinhala identity

Originally coming from the Northeast of India, the Sinhala population arrived in Sri Lanka beginning in the 6th century BC. At the time they spoke an Indo-Aryan language related to Sanskrit and Pali. Their conversion to Buddhism took place under the influence of the Maurya Empire in the 3rd century B.C. However, the present forms of Sinhala identity only go back to the colonial period, the time of the popularisation of Oriental studies and the rediscovery of Sanskrit. In the 1930s, national consciousness thus transcended the local, regional and caste identities which had previously been predominant. It was in 1931 that the exclusive idea of a Buddhist Sinhala nation appeared for the first time as the standard of the Dharmapala nationalist movement. This movement succeeded in doing what the bourgeoisie on its own never managed to do: associate the mass of the population in the centre and South of the country in a 'Sinhala nation'¹⁴.

The policy applied as from 1948 was a continuation of the colonial government. English was kept as the national language and the Parliament was controlled by a Westernised elite. However, an electoral gap did not take long in forming between this elite and the majority of the population. The Sinhala nationalists of the People's United Front, who were close to the ideas of Anagarika Dharmapala, took power in 1956 by promising to 'accord Buddhism and the Sinhala language their legitimate places.' In 1972, in this same spirit, an article was inserted in the constitution whereby Buddhism was given the first place, stating 'that consequently the duty of the State is to protect and promote Buddhism.'¹⁵ There is a stereotype rooted in the West which considers Buddhism to be a peace-loving religion. However, the situation in Sri Lanka demonstrates that it has served as the basis for a militant ideology, justified by the need to protect the religion.

¹² Eric Paul Meyer, *Une histoire de l'Inde, les Indiens face à leur passé*, p. 104.

¹³ Ibid., Jonathan Spencer, p.10.

¹⁴ Id., p.76.

¹⁵ 'The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e),' *The constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*, Chapter II, art. 9.

b. The Tamil identity

Though certain Tamil historians claim that the Tamils constitute the original population of Sri Lanka, their permanent presence on the island is really confirmed only beginning in the 11th century AD. At the height of the influence of the Chola Empire, under the reign of Rajendra Chola 1st, the Tamil armies invaded the island and captured the Sinhala King Mahinda V¹⁶. Beginning then, the existence of a Tamil community in Sri Lanka was largely dependent on the capability of intervention by the armies of Southern India. In the 13th century, a new Tamil kingdom was thus established in the North of the island, extending initially from the Jaffna Peninsula, under the authority of King Magha, who came from Kalinga, in the East of India, later as vassal of the Padyan Empire. The massive immigration of the Sinhala towards the South of the island and the predominance of the Tamils in the North go back from this period.

It was this Tamil country that provided the majority of local managers during the colonial period. The colonial power relied on the principal national minority to impose its authority. Beginning in this period, many educated Tamils – lawyers, state officials, doctors, etc. – found employment in various localities within the British colonial empire, particularly in India, in Malaysia and in Singapore. This educated class also forms the basis of the modern Tamil Diaspora, which mainly left for the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France. This Diaspora has become one of the principal resources of the LTTE, of which a special division is charged with racketeering in the communities established abroad.

c. Caught in the crossfire: the Muslims and the ‘Indian Tamils’

While the Sinhala and the Tamils constitute the two principal communities in Sri Lanka, 8.5% of the population describes itself as belonging to the Muslim community. Originally coming from India and speaking Tamil, the Sri Lanka Muslims come from various ethnic groups and for centuries they have maintained commercial and family links with Southeast Asia. Though they took part in violent clashes with the Sinhala at the start of the 20th century, the majority of them today is trying to remain apart from the conflict and opposes a partition of the island. Driven from the lands in the East of the island by the LTTE, many Muslims have become refugees under the protection of the government in Colombo. The ethnic and religious labels used by the other communities have nonetheless prompted an identical turn among some of the Muslims. There has thus been a proliferation of mosques and the appearance of women wearing veils in many parts of the country. A radical minority demands the creation of an independent Islamic state on the Eastern coast of the island.¹⁷

Meanwhile, there is also a Tamil community living in the South of Sri Lanka, in the territory which is majority Sinhala. The so-called ‘Indian Tamils’ or ‘Hills country Tamils’ came over from India beginning in the 19th century to work in the large plantations. Coming from various castes of the South of India, they were considered as foreigners from the moment of independence. One of the first decisions taken by the Sri Lanka government in 1948 was the disfranchisement of this population¹⁸. The elites in Colombo feared that their vote would go massively to the parties of the extreme left and might threaten their hold on power. Rejected by the Sinhala majority, they never got support from the Tamils of the North and the East, who also considered them to be foreigners. Following strong pressure from India, the government finally accorded them full citizenship in the 1980s.

¹⁶ Ibid., A. Jeyaratnam Wilsons.

¹⁷ Marc Gaborieau, *Un autre islam, Inde, Pakistan, Bangladesh*, col. Planète Inde, Albin Michel, 2007, p.260.

¹⁸ Ibid., Jonathan Spencer, p.10.

4. Descent into hell: all-out war and terrorism

The Sri Lanka civil war constitutes one of the most murderous conflicts in the world. It controls a considerable logistical apparatus which was long supported from bases in the South of India and by an international network of smuggling that is particularly effective. In the struggle for the independence of Tamil Eelam, it not only fights against the Sri Lanka Army but also attacks all dissidents in its own community. The LTTE tries indeed to establish itself as the only representative of the Tamil cause. The Minister for Social Protection, Douglas Devananda, a former combatant of the Eelam Revolutionary Organizers (EROs) who abandoned armed struggle in 1987, has had to escape many suicide attacks. On November 28, 2007, a woman ill with polio blew herself up in front of the buildings of the Ministry of Public and Social Assistance.¹⁹

Since 1987, suicide attacks have become a major element in the strategy of the LTTE. On July 5, 2007, 'Captain' Miler detonated an explosion in his lorry on the military base of Jaffna, causing the death of 40 soldiers. Since then, the 'black tigers' were responsible for a hundred suicide attacks against military installations and strategic as well as symbolic targets in the country. The Joint Operation Command, the Central Bank and the World Trade Centre of Colombo, the international airport of Katunayake and the Temple of the Holy Tooth of Buddha in Kandy, the centre of Sinhala Buddhism, fell victim to Tamil terrorism. However, the most spectacular action of the LTTE was the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was killed in the midst of an electoral campaign by a kamikaze explosion on May 21, 1991.

According to recent evaluations, the 'black tigers' now have around 404 members, of whom 312 are men, 'the claws of the tigers,' and 92 are women, 'the birds of liberty'²⁰. They are the backbone of the military organisation of the LTTE, and they are always in the front line of attacks against Army posts. Extremely fanatical, they deliberately seek to die and thereby constitute a terrible threat to the soldiers. The Army itself recognises its powerlessness to stop a woman or a man who has decided to die as a martyr and is wearing an explosive belt. Since the breakdown of the 2002 cease-fire, the black tigers have again perpetrated 17 attacks. Despite all the efforts applied by the Army, this entity therefore certainly constitutes the most serious threat to the security of Sri Lanka.

The LTTE is one of the most dangerous and most fanatical terrorist groups in the world. Nonetheless, the actions of the Sri Lanka Army also receive international condemnation. The military offensive launched against the Tamil strongholds in the East during the summer of 2006 had major humanitarian repercussions, prompting more than 40,000 civilians to flee in less than one week. The population is thus in a desperate state, caught between the Army and the LTTE, which hunts down villagers right into the churches to enrol them by force. Despite the promises made to the United Nations by the Sri Lanka government, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and many NGOs launched a desperate appeal in 2006 for immediate cessation of combat. In December 2007, the American Directorate of Defence Trade Controls announced that it was suspending its exports of military supplies to Sri Lanka, since Colombo had not improved the human rights situation in the country.²¹

¹⁹ 'Sri Lanka/LTTE : 2 suicide attacks bloody Colombo' ESISC, 28/11/2007

²⁰ R. Ramasubramanian, 'Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka,' *IPCS Research papers*, 5, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi 08/2004.

²¹ Policy of Denial for Defense Export Licenses for Sri Lanka, Directorate of Defense Trade Controls, 26/12/2007.

http://www.pmdtc.state.gov/suspension_sri_lanka_exportlicenses.htm

5. International efforts: Indian intervention force and Scandinavian mediation

In July 1987, the government in Colombo signed an agreement with India providing for granting certain autonomy to the North of Sri Lanka. For a long time New Delhi had agreed to receive and support Tamil militants; after four years of civil war, India was no longer ready to support such a situation of instability opposite its southern shores. In order to ensure that the accord would be respected, India deployed an intervention force, the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force), which ended up attracting the resentment of extremists from both camps. The Indian troops had to endure harassment from Tamil combatants. It was in particular in reaction to the presence of the IPKF that the LTTE adopted a strategy of kamikaze terrorism²². Moreover, the Sinhala Marxist ultranationalists of the JVP attacked all the followers of the peace accord in their community.

The IPKF finally withdrew from Sri Lanka in 1989 at the request of the new Sri Lanka President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the candidate of the 'United National Party. He in fact hoped to conclude a peace treaty with the LTTE if he got the Indians to depart. However, he was killed on May 1, 1993 in a suicide attack. After his death, Sri Lanka alternated between clashes and cease-fires before descending into total warfare. Many humanitarian organisations present on the ground have estimated that a million people were displaced in the course of this period.

From the beginning of 2000, the Norwegian government got involved in the search for a negotiated solution to the conflict. A cease-fire agreement was thus signed on February 22, 2002 between the Sri Lanka Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the head of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran. The implementation of the agreement was entrusted to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), composed of Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, Danes and Icelanders. Although a relative calm in fact took hold between 2002 and 2005, the election of Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa in November of that year marked the return of fighting. Ever since his accession to power, a series of explosions attributed to the LTTE set off a new vicious cycle of attacks and reprisals.

6. Conclusion

The civil war in Sri Lanka springs from deep causes. As we have seen, the Sinhala and Tamil nationalists have used their historical past to create irreconcilable identities. Although the initial causes of the conflict were economic and social, the confrontation of these two nationalisms today renders any compromise extremely difficult to conclude. The Sri Lanka government is today engaged in its final offensive against the LTTE. The terrorist organisation nonetheless still has a strong military capability, rendering the outcome of fighting very uncertain. Not a day goes by in Sri Lanka without either the Army or the terrorist organisation claiming a victory on the ground. The absence of international observers in the North of the island takes away a large part of the credibility of the results reported by the two parties.

The number of attacks and deaths in the province of the North has grown greatly since the end of the cease-fire. Moreover, civilian victims continue to accumulate in the refugee camps of Tamil Nadu or in the South of the island, without any hope of return. Despite the efforts made by the international community, it therefore seems that the nationalists in power in Colombo and the Tamil Tigers have decided to conduct the conflict until the enemy has been eliminated. Furthermore, we may fear that this situation will encourage Muslim extremists to claim independence in turn lest they carry on violent action. Under these conditions, and so long as Sri Lanka has a chance of being a prosperous country – it presently is reporting

²² Cf. supra.

annual economic growth of 7% – it is impossible to predict an end to this conflict. We must remember again that this war is already responsible for the death of 70,000 persons, both civilians and combatants, and for the flight of hundreds of thousands of others.

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