

## Conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka: An Appraisal of Government Policies of Conflict Resolution

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**Abstract:** *The conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka is the most clamoring among the contemporary ethnic conflicts in the world. Majority of Sri Lankan people is Sinhalese, while a large number of minorities is Tamil. During British rule, the Tamil migration in Sri Lanka from India was held with the augmentation of tea industry. After independence, the disparities between Tamils and Sinhalese are clearly observable. In education, business and running of government affairs Sinhalese established their strong presence. As a result, the young aged Tamils formed the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to establish a separate Tamil state-Eelam through armed struggle, which eventually led to a civil war and more than 65000 lives lost. The government of Sri Lanka is responsible for resolving this conflict peacefully. The policies that have been adopted by Sri Lankan governments swing from one regime to another. The policies are varied with political, military and economic purposes. The primary policy was to solve this conflict through military might. Failure of the military power to success in the battle leads to think in either creation of political consensus or economic development. All of the governments publicly vowed to develop the Tamil region. But in delivering things it was not as evidential as vocal. All the political parties often used this problem as a ladder to go to power. They consider the peace process as a zero-sum game in which one party's peace achievements translate directly to the other's losses of both prestige and political support. Some conflict resolution scholars' argument is that conflict arises from the denial of particular needs and the roads to conflict resolution must concentrate on satisfaction of specific economic, psychological, and social needs. Unfortunately, the peace process initiated by Norway is at snails pace. Everybody hopes that new power will usher the peace talks and try for a durable solution. In fact, the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict is a complex problem which involves historical, ethno-religious, linguistic, geopolitical and economic factors which are intertwined with local power politics and, increasingly, with Indian geopolitics and international power play. All these factors must be addressed in formulating a policy to resolve this conflict.*

### Introduction

Sri Lanka is a small island state situated in the Bay of Bengal. It was under British colonial rule and came into being as an independent and sovereign state from 1948. The palk-straits separated Sri Lanka from India. The majority of Sri Lankan population is Sinhalese, while minority of them is Tamil. This small nation has been suffering from a prolonged issue of ethnic conflict, which eventually led to a civil war. The minority Tamils began to fight for a separate homeland in the northern part of Sri Lanka. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is the most clamoring among the contemporary such kind of conflicts in the world. This problem is creating political antagonism in one hand and on the other hand blighting the economic prospects of the country.

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From time to time, many peace efforts have been taken to resolve the problem. There were many rounds of talks between government representatives and Tamils. But apparently all efforts went in vain. The peace initiatives often bring aspiration of hopes in a way that there will be a solution after it. Couple of years back declaration of ceasefire by the rebels and halting of Army operations seen as a great progress towards peace. But lasting peace still have not achieved. Recently Chandrika Kumaratunga handed over power to her successor but with an agony of unsuccessful in overcoming the Tamil conflict. Everybody is now looking at the new Presidents policy to manage this crisis peacefully. In this context, present study is an initiative to analyze the conflict between Tamil Tigers and Sinhalese with special reference to the government policies of crisis management, in which crisis management involves identifying a crisis, planning a response to the crisis and confronting and resolving the crisis.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The overall objective of the present study is to analyze the existing conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in the perspectives of government policies of conflict resolution. The specific objectives of the study are as below:

- a. To know the origin and evolution of Tamil problem with special reference to the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE);
- b. To know the rise and dimension of Tamil militancy and the concept of Eelam;
- c. To present various steps of the Sri Lankan government for conflict resolution;
- d. To appraise government policies and strategies of conflict resolution and their failure in addressing this ethnic conflict.

### **Study Method**

This study is a qualitative work to appraise the government policies and strategies to solve the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka using secondary sources of data and personal knowledge, observation and analysis of the researcher. A brief literature review of the previous studies, relevant books, journals, dissertations, government documents and newspapers etc. based on origin, evolution, issues and dimensions of this ethnic conflict is used as secondary sources of data. Personal knowledge and observation of the researcher is also used to analyze the secondary data purposively. However, the secondary sources of data were examined in simple process as percentages.

## Sri Lanka and the Tamils

It is said that the Tamil migration in Sri Lanka was held with the augmentation of tea industry in the country. When the British started to develop tea industry in Sri Lanka there was strong need for cheap labor. Tamils began to fill up this need in the tea industry. The plantation industry brought massive Tamil migrated labor in Sri Lanka. Majority of the Sri Lankan people is Sinhalese, while a large number of minorities is Tamil and Muslim too (Table-1). One of the significant aspects of division between Tamils and the Sinhalese is religion. Sinhalese are Buddhist; on the contrary, Tamils are Hindu.

**Table-1: Distribution of Sri Lankan Population on the Basis of Ethnicity and Religion**

Ethnicity	Percentage	Religion	Percentage
Sinhalese	74	Buddhist	69.3
Tamil	18	Hindu	15.5
Moor	07	Muslim	07.5
Others (Malay, Burgher etc.)	01	Christian	06.9
		Others	00.8
Total Population			19,742,439

Source: (CSIS, 2004:4)

## Origin of Tamil Problem

The origin of the Tamil problem rooted in long back. Even it was clearly noticed during the process of independence of Sri Lanka from the hand of the British. From that time some Tamil Leaders thought that the freedom from British will give an upper hand to Sinhalese people and it would be difficult for them to continue their own effort for development. Problems between the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka are not a phenomenon of the 1980s. According to ones approach, one can trace them back over 20, 50, 100 or even 2000 years (Rajanayagam, 1994: 9).

Immediately after independence, the question of national language arose as a thorny issue. The establishment of Sinhalese as national language gave a huge blow to the Tamil national and marked the beginning of a sense of deprivation among Tamil. The disparities between the Tamils and Sinhalese are clearly observable. In education, business and running of government affairs Sinhalese establish strong presence. Moreover, the government decisions and policy about education was acted as a great snub for the Tamil educational institutions. These initiatives make the Tamil education system in precarious condition. Many Tamil educational institutions fall in a sudden risk of closure. Some of them are closed due



to lack of fund. It has immensely struck the mind of Tamil people about the future of their children's education and added fuel to the growing concern of the Tamil minority.

In 1970 government declared a new system of quotas in accordance with ethnicity for admission in the Universities (Wilson, 2000: 49). It created heavy grievances and strong sense of discontentment in the mind of the Tamils. They thought that initiative was to block Tamils to get higher education and thus make them lagging behind the Sinhalese. The resentment over the issue was prevalent in the Tamil community and disgruntled them all. The Tamil Political Leadership felt increasingly frustrated in their search for accommodation and began to turn, first towards espousing an autonomous region and then supporting a separate state for the Tamils (Silva, 2002: 3). They create armed militia to fight with government forces and attack in government offices. Some Tamil political parties also began to raise their voice to get adequate attention from the national government and created the foundation stone for Tamil nationality.

The Sinhalese inspired riots, which closed the door to solve the Tamil problem peacefully. On the other hand, the Tamil militant switched to a full-scale guerilla war (Rajanayagam, 1994: 12). Clashes and riots took place in several parts of the country. Burning of houses, damaging properties and disrupting normal life were commonly happened at that time. The struggle finally staged by a civil war with heavy fighting between government forces and Tamil tigers. The Tamils desired to secede from Sri Lanka with establishment of their own Eelam. As per the desire the Tamil Tigers had intensified fighting for a new Tamil homeland. Tamils considered themselves different or better than anyone else because the government in Sri Lanka was saying that Tamils were less than someone else, especially the ruling party in Sri Lanka (Parker, 1989: 20).

### **Creation of LTTE and Other Militant Groups**

In the early years of 70s, deprivation and disparity among the Sinhalese and Tamils have been widened, the young and nationalist Tamil felt uneasy to stay without struggle for their cause of suffering. Tamils were become more hostile and eager to take path of fighting. It was believed that in the year 1972 young aged Tamils formed the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to made all out attack on Sri Lankan government forces. The discontentment was so severe that many were ready to lay down their life for an independent Tamil nation. There were five operational groups of the Tamil formed within some years of the struggle viz., LTTE, EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front), PLOT (People's Liberation Organization), TELO (Tamil United



Liberation Organization) and EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students).

LTTE is the main Tamil militant group. The major offenses against government forces and establishments have been launched by LTTE. The destructive power of LTTE and ability to carry out attack is stunning. In a stage of the struggle there were rift among the Tamil militants groups. However, LTTE came out as a main force behind the Tamil insurgency attack sidelining the others as weak player. In course of time other group's activities waned drastically. Finally, LTTE become the sole group still stands in the fight.

### **Rise of Tamil Militancy and the Concept of Eelam**

The growing discrepancy and hatred by the majority Sinhalese to the minority Tamil and the consecutive attack on Tamils by the Sinhalese made up in the minds of Tamils that it would not possible to retain equal position without arms. In the 1970s these frustrated young Tamils began to conclude that the only means by which Tamils could attain justice and equality in Sri Lanka is to fight through arms. Militants groups formed in the north, with the aim of establishing a separate Tamil state-Eelam (Feith, 1989: 84). The Tamil political leadership at stage decided that the only way to solve the hatred and vengeance of Sinhalese is to have a separate Tamil land. Though there was initial thinking of having a great share from the state pie and at best having autonomy or regional development councils but later it has changed towards independence. As a result, the young Tamil fighters and LTTE high ups shun the other idea except Eelam or separate homeland.

### **Steps of Sri Lankan Government for Peace**

Sri Lanka has a long history of sustained democratic government. The hand over of state power happens through democratic process. Whatever the political party in power there one of the major assignments is to resolve Tamil conflict. Tamil conflict is the part of all the governments came in the power. The escalation of violence during the decade of 1980's made the concern Sri Lankan government worried. The losses and damages are also heavy (Table-2). That's why it is almost customary that as soon as new government comes in power they immediately enunciate their policy in tackling the burning issue of ethnic violence in the north of the country.

**Table-2: Losses and Damages as a Result of Civil War in Sri Lanka**

Subject	Number
Number of lives lost in the civil war in the last 18 years	65000 +
Number of lives LTTE claims to have lost in same number of years as of 2002	17637
Years since independence from Britain	56
Years in Civil War	21
Duration of Ceasefire in years	2
Number of Internally Displaced Persons from North East as a result of Civil War	800000 +
Tamil Internally Displaced (%)	78
Muslims Internally Displaced (%)	13
Sinhalese Internally Displaced (%)	8
Administrative buildings destroyed or damaged since 1982(%)	60

Source: (CSIS, 2004:4)

As Tamil issue became a prevalent matter in all the political surroundings of Colombo so as it has immense impact in the election system of Sri Lanka. Situation as like that no Tamil can be elected from a Sinhalese dominated area and no Sinhalese can be elected from the Tamil dominated area. Besides, rival political parties always allege that the other party is lenient toward Tamil and country's integrity will be in question if the opposition will in power. Despite the allegation and counter allegation Colombo continues to have democratic government and very cautious about any move in dealing with Tamil problem. One notable thing is that, with having a prolonged ethnic conflict and Military operation there is no instances of Military regime in Sri Lanka unlike any conflict torn Asian or African countries.

**Government of Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike:** Mrs. Bandaranaike run Sri Lanka from 1970-77. During her time several rules and policies had been taken that bolster Sinhalese and antagonize Tamils. The concept and demand for Eelam or separate Tamil homeland gained ground during her time. Tamils took arms and escalated the violence in this period. Mrs Bandaranaike's SLFP led government between 1970 and 1977 responded to and in turn catalyzed Sinhalese Chauvinism by pursuing a number of policies which were patently discriminatory against Tamil, particularly in the field of education (Manor, 1984: 9). Bandaranaike brought new constitution to Sri Lanka. During her rule Sinhalese declared as state language and in education and employment Sinhalese has been given preferences by different policies. In the 1977 general election

Jayewardene defeated Bandaranaike and he becomes the new president.

**President Jayewardene's Government:** Coming to power Jayewardene brought changes in the political system of the country. In his period Sri Lanka proclaimed its third constitution in the year 1978. But one important aspect of the third constitution is that it had not been incorporated anything about the government peace design to solve the Tamil problem. Initially president Jayewardene thought that he can solve the problem with military might. He equipped the military with purchasing heavy weapons. Jayewardene declared 'within 90 days we will liquidate the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. He had launched all the three forces in the years 1985-86 and the first part of 1987 but he had failed (Gopalsamy, 1989: 119).

This failure made Jayewardene realization of the fact that he could not defeat LTTE. Then he eagerly waited to have a helping hand from outside. President Jayewardene has been more nervous with the Tamil crisis. As his period was period of heightened tension and hectic activities by the Tamils he tried to have foreign assistance in dealing the crisis. With diplomatic rapport Jayewardene finally successful to sign on April 29, Indo Sri Lanka accord with the then Indian Prime Minister Rajib Gandhi. This accord brought Indian troops in the name of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to the soil of Sri Lanka. The first thing to note when discussing the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace accord is that it was an agreement entered into between The governments of Sri Lanka and India without consulting the Sinhalese and the Tamil people who were the real parties to the ethnic conflict (Seevanayagam, 1989:126)

**Government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa:** Ranasinghe Premadasa elected as the successor of Jayewardene. But Premadasa's UNP government ionizes by lacking in legitimacy and people's support. He opposed the Indian troops in Sri Lanka from the beginning. His policy was to solve the problem internally. As soon as he came in power he had tried for the withdrawal of Indian troops. He was successful in his initiative. The Indian troops have been withdrawn in his tenure. Premadasa tried to solve the issue of economic disparity. He undertook poverty alleviation programs and other various development activities in the Tamil and Sinhalese both areas. In fact, he tried to mitigate the Tamil discontentment by developing the economic conditions. Later he was assassinated by Tamil suicide bomber in Colombo.

**President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Government:** Kumaratunga's maiden term in power signifies her desire for a powerful executive presidency and signaled her intentions for settlement of Tamil issue through negotiation. Soon after taking office, she sent a delegation to Tamil area, which was widely hailed by all quarters. She also took some



initiatives showing her goodwill gestures. She withdrawn embargo in some cases, which is imposed by earlier government. Moreover, coming to power President Kumaratunga arranged peace talks with the rebels to resolve the issue. In her public speeches she opined in favor of the peaceful solution of long standing civil war. Kumaratungas important initiative to resolve the problem was in the way of giving green signal to the peace talks with the help of Norwegian mediation. The Kumaratunga government made one more attempt at reaching a settlement with the LTTE through Norwegian mediation in August 2000 but by that time President had lost her majority in the legislature through defections and the LTTE having no confidence that she could deliver on a deal, summarily rejected the offer-(Aryasinha, 2001:25-50). Afterwards, there were consecutive contacts between the two parties, but nothing has been come out of these and there was an attack on President Kumaratungas life in her reelection campaign in the year 1999 (Silva, 2003: 31)

The peace process finally eventuated in a ceasefire agreement in January 2002. By this for the interim period violence has come to a stop. Good will gestures were now seen from both sides. Government has withdrawn some troops and making positive initiative as a sign of reciprocal good understanding. Tamil tigers also stopped any new attack. But the President took a u turn from her earlier position; On November 4, 2003, with then Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe in the United States to meet President Bush, President Chandrika Kumaratunga dismissed three key cabinet ministers, prorogued parliament, and declared a state of emergency in the capital city of Colombo (CSIS, 2004:12). Kumaratunga despite her many peace initiatives could not do much in terms of real gain because of the consistent political power clash with the rival opposition party and its leaders. It is ironical that both the main political parties are interested in a successful completion of the peace process but they hardly cooperate with each other on the issue. It was one of the main reasons why President Kumaratunga could not bring a real solution for the Tamil problem. But anyhow, Sri Lankan will remember her presidency with not being able to bring peace in her homeland. Now with the election of the new President in November 2005 it will be interesting to see where the peace process stands under President Mahinda Rajapakse. He was believed as a hardliner and he also appointed a hardliner Prime Minister.

### **Appraisal of Government Policies and Strategies for Conflict Resolution and their Failures**

Conflict resolution need to look at its own perspective and it varies from one conflict to another. Proponent of the realist school of conflict analysis like William Zartman, describes conflict as a result of conscious and calculated decisions anticipating victory (Zartman, 1989: 26). The

strategies that has been adopted by Sri Lankan government swings from one rule to another. In the strategies, that observed in the process is varied with political, military and economic purposes. In different perspectives different strategies has been adopted. The primary strategy was that in initial level many policy makers thought that it could be solved by military might. Failure of the military power to success in the battle leads to think in either creation of political consensus or economic development.

In the case of political strategies patronizing own ethnic group or creating a pocket of favored group in fight against the Tamils had been launched. In the early days of the problem, policies adopted to strengthen the Sinhalese in education, culture and administration so that they surpassed the Tamil position. Particularly in the rule of President Bandaranaike she shown her support for political superiority of the Sinhalese and took appropriate measures for that. Later on special political strategies has been developed to create pocket of government support to quell or dishearten the Tamil struggle.

The military strategy was to demolish the Tamil base and capability of attack by supremacy. Many governments took this in its initial days. To built courage in the rank and file of the Armed forces and to have the support of Sinhalese that government is doing something. Many Sri Lankan governments tried to purchase sophisticated military hardware to bolster the military capability. Most leaders sought military equipment from western countries and if not at least from the Asian neighbors. On the economic front, strategies were to take development initiatives in Tamil part so that the disparity can be reduced. Some of the leaders identified that the disparity and differences behind the problem if not overtly but covertly. But this effort struck a serious blow when the north was under the Tamil control. All of the governments publicly vowed to develop the Tamil region. But in delivering things it was not as evidential as vocal.

The failure of the strategies lies in the condition on the ground. The conflict is multidimensional and continuing from historical past. Historical woes are difficult to heal. As it grows from time to time it has many ramifications too. These ramifications made the problem complex and difficult to solve. Different interest groups want solution keeping in mind to safeguard their own interest. One of the basic reasons for the failure could be the rigidity of the all parties. They are stick in their main demand. But for having a solution all concerned should need to give some concessions and look around into the alternatives. But in case of Tamil crisis all the parties rejected the alternatives out rightly. Thus it makes the peace process difficult to achieve.



Sri Lanka has a very strong two party dominated democratic political environment. Throughout the history of the country it ruled by either of these two parties. Two party systems sometimes bring boon and sometimes bane for the country. In a two party system if consensus can not be achieved than it creates strong divisiveness among people. In the case of Tamil case also government strategy failed for a reason of this. Both the political parties often used this problem as a ladder to go to power. So fearing that any peace deal under the government of any party will lessen the chances of other party to come in power none of the party finally ventures to do it. So they vehemently oppose any initiative of the government for peace without judging the context and outcome. Each political party is so intent on getting credit for advances in the peace process that they are reluctant to cooperate in pursuit of this common goal. Furthermore, they see the peace process as a zero-sum game in which one party's peace achievements translate directly to the other's losses of both prestige and political support (CSIS, 2004: 19). That makes the task of Sri Lankan government difficult to come in an agreement.

Another one reason is that Sri Lanka has a Muslim minority also. Though they are not in a strong position to take a high stake on the deal between the Tamils and government but still a pivotal power in the ethnic minority scene of Sri Lanka. Any outcome could jeopardize their peaceful living and can make them to start a similar agitation like the Tamils. Apart from that any strong support by them either to government or the Tamils apparently will be strengthen the side drastically. These things also worried the top brass of government administration. But in the case of Sri Lanka whatever the strategy may be it ultimately turns into failure. Some conflict resolution scholars' argument is that conflict arises from the denial of particular needs and the roads to conflict resolution must concentrate on satisfaction of specific economic, psychological, and social needs (Azar and Burton, 1986: 9).

## **Conclusion**

Sri Lanka once again successfully completed the Presidential Election of November 2005. It marked the end of almost decade old rule of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Mahindra Rajapakse sworn in as a new president after his victory in the November election. It is believed in the political environment of Colombo that he is a hardliner in the issue of Tamil conflict. However, as new President in power so there is high aspiration among all quarters about the policy of new president concerning this conflict. Observers also eagerly waiting to look how he deals with the stalled peace process.



The peace process initiated by Norway is at snails pace. Everybody hopes that new power will usher the peace talks and try for a durable solution. Many analysts believe that solution of the problem will give a boost in Sri Lanka's economic development. As it is located in an important choke point, so the end of the conflict will surely bring more prosperity in this territory. Obviously, the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict is a complex problem which involves historical, ethno-religious, linguistic, geopolitical and economic factors which are intertwined with local power politics and, increasingly, with Indian geopolitics and international power play. All these factors must be addressed in formulating a policy to conflict resolution.

After 9/11 incident Global War on terrorism has been launched. It has made drastic impediments on the ethno-political struggle for seeking independence. This sort of struggle now is categorized as so-called terrorism. That's why all of this kind of movement is not gaining ground. That marked the waning of violence and wind blowing for peace. Recent example can be cited from the peace deal between Aceh separatist movement and Government of Indonesia after Helsinki talks. Therefore, there is possibility for breaking a deal in case of Sri Lanka also. However, for this all parties should come in clear hand, discuss openly, and have to make concessions in both ends. In fact, the process of finding peace in Sri Lanka is not one party's business or the business of a President. It is the most important issue for national integration and development in Sri Lanka at this moment, and that has to be kept in mind at all times by the government to take policies, as well by all the citizens of the country.

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