

# The role of socialists in the civil war in Sri Lanka

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THE GRUESOME FINALE of Sri Lanka's 26-year-long civil war drew international attention and considerable concern for the plight of civilians trapped in the war zone. Many people for the first time became aware of a conflict which had already claimed more than 70,000 fatalities. But the publicity tended to obscure rather than clarify the causes of the war, measures that could have been taken earlier to prevent the bloodbath at its climax, and what can be done now to advance democratization in the future. It is especially important to critique the role of socialists, because some of them have contributed to the rise and entrenchment of ethnic nationalism instead of constituting alternatives to it.

## Independence and After

Prior to independence from the British in 1948, socialist politics was strong in Sri Lanka, at that time called Ceylon. In 1935, Trotskyists formed the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which engaged in union organizing and electoral politics, and, when the Fourth International was formed in 1938, affiliated with it. The Stalinist minority in the party was expelled, and later became the Ceylon Communist Party (CCP). In 1940, after LSSP leaders were arrested, their press seized, and their meetings banned, the party decided that the revolution in Ceylon could develop only as part of the Indian Revolution, and sent LSSP organizers to work with Trotskyists in India. In 1945, party leaders were released from jail and revived the LSSP. Given that capitalism was so much weaker in Ceylon than in India, the Left played a proportionally larger role in the independence movement in Ceylon.

Post-Independence, their trade union organizing, activity in the women's liberation movement, and campaigns for social security and welfare programs continued with considerable success. The result was that Sri Lanka had one of the highest levels of human development of all Third World countries, with low infant, under-5, and maternal mortality rates and extremely high literacy rates among both men and women. The contrast with India was striking. Even today, despite decades of neoliberal policies and civil war, its human development indices remain far higher than India's.

Sri Lanka's was a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Left, comprising members from a variety of linguistic, caste, and religious communities. They believed that an attack on one section of the working class was an attack on all workers. Therefore, when the ruling United National Party (UNP), which took

power at Independence, launched an assault on the citizenship and franchise of Tamil tea plantation workers (descendants of indentured laborers brought over by the British from India, and the most oppressed segment of the Tamil-speaking community), the Left defended them. The UNP was unashamedly a party of the ruling class and its rationale for the attack on plantation workers was simple: They had voted overwhelmingly against the UNP in the 1947 elections, helping to bring to power candidates of the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC, later to become the Ceylon Workers' Congress or CWC) in 7 constituencies and Left candidates in 14 more, condemning the UNP to a minority government. Eliminating the plantation workers from the electorate would help secure an absolute majority for the UNP in future elections. Their vulnerability as an immigrant minority, isolated on the plantations from the rest of the population, made it easier to attack them without arousing public opposition.

The Left in Parliament argued that the Citizenship Acts were racist, anti-working class, and an attack on democracy. Voting on the bills was revealing: While the CIC and Left voted against them, most MPs of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), representing the Tamil elite, voted for them. However, a section of the party, led by S. J. V. Chelvanayakam—who foresaw that this attack on the rights of one Tamil-speaking community could be followed by attacks on others—left the ACTC, denouncing its leader as a traitor. They formed the Federal Party (FP), known in Tamil as the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi or Lanka Tamil Kingdom Party. This party's program offered nothing to the oppressed Tamil workers fighting for their political rights; the area in the North and East claimed for Tamil sovereignty did not even touch the areas where the plantation workers were concentrated. Class, caste, and location excluded these Tamils from the nationalist dream.

Language became the next battleground. In 1944, the Ceylon Legislative Council voted by an overwhelming majority to make both Sinhala and Tamil official languages for school instruction, public service examinations, and legislative proceedings. But in 1956, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who had broken away from the UNP to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and a coalition, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP or People's United Front), fought the elections on the slogan of "Sinhala Only" and won an absolute majority. A large part of the Sinhalese petty bourgeoisie, including Buddhist monks, were won over to this agenda in the belief that it would provide them with jobs by reducing employment opportunities for Tamils. In the end, not only the mainstream parties, but also the breakaway Left party, the Viplavakari (Revolutionary) LSSP of Philip Gunawardena, voted for the bill, while minority parties and the rest of the Left opposed it. With great prescience LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva observed that Sinhala Only would lead to the creation of "two torn little bleeding states."

In 1957, responding to protests by the FP, Bandaranaike signed the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam (B-C) Pact, recognizing Tamil as the language of a national minority and of administration in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, where regional councils with limited powers over administration would be established. A year later, in response to militant agitation by Buddhist monks, Bandaranaike renounced the Pact. Tamils protested in Jaffna by blacking out the Sinhala letter *sri* which had been substituted for the English letters on vehicle number-plates. This was followed in turn by an orgy of arson and murder against Tamils by Sinhalese hoodlums in other parts of the country, including Colombo. At first Bandaranaike refused to intervene, but when the violence threatened to rage out of control, he handed over authority to the Governor-General, who declared an Emergency. Stopping the riots would have required shooting at Sinhalese gangs, and Bandaranaike wanted to avoid the unpopularity with Sinhalese nationalists that this would cause. Still, his appeasement of the right failed. In 1959, an organization of Buddhist monks, the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna, assassinated Bandaranaike.

If the Left lacked enough strength in Parliament to defeat anti-minority legislation, it made up for it by the strength it derived from grassroots organizing. In 1953 the Left organized a hartal (general

strike) to protest against welfare cuts, including the withdrawal of the rice subsidy, which a visiting World Bank mission had advised. It was a massive success, leading to the resignation of the prime minister and restoration of the subsidy. Faced with a choice between continuing to extend its organizational strength at the grassroots and reaching for political power, however, the leadership of the Left parties chose the latter.

### **Abandoning Justice for the Minorities**

In 1964, the LSSP and Communist Party formed an alliance with the SLFP, now led by the widow of the assassinated Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike. This was a popular front in which the program of the two Left parties was suspended. Their support for the rights of hill-country Tamils and parity for Sinhala and Tamil was abandoned. Just as earlier the UNP had opposed the B-C Pact, these parties now opposed a similar pact between UNP leader Senanayake and Chelvanayakam. Breakaway groups from the LSSP and Communist Party stood by their earlier positions, yet the fact that the only major non-minority parties which had supported minority rights now abandoned that cause shattered working class unity and strengthened Sinhala nationalism with its right-wing agenda. In 1968, the LSSP and Communist Party formed the United Front (UF) with the SLFP, which was elected to power in 1970. Despite its name, this was another popular front. The Left parties justified this coalition by arguing that, while the UNP was the party of private capital, including foreign capital, the SLFP was committed to public ownership of the Bank of Ceylon, tea plantations, public transport, etc., and also to the welfare state. However, they surrendered their capacity to oppose state policies discriminating against minorities and the unprincipled nature of the alliance grew increasingly apparent as time went on.

In 1970, the UF government introduced a measure that made a significant contribution to the growth of a militant movement of Tamil youth. This was the “standardization” system, whereby the minimum university entrance marks for a Tamil-medium student were higher than those for a Sinhala-medium student. The new system put Tamil students at a disadvantage by comparison with Sinhalese students from the same social strata, creating a group of frustrated and embittered Tamil youths.

Given all these attacks on equality aimed at giving Sinhalese privileges at the expense of Tamils, it is paradoxical that the first large-scale violence of Sinhalese against Sinhalese was during the insurrection of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP or People’s Liberation Front) in 1971, in which an estimated 5-10,000 people were killed. The JVP drew its membership and supporters precisely from the strata that were supposed to benefit from the Sinhala Only policies. The depth of dissatisfaction among these sections should have alerted the UF government to the facts that discrimination against Tamils did not benefit the majority of Sinhalese, and other policies to address issues of poverty and unemployment were needed. Instead, the UF simply went farther along the same trajectory. In the name of nationalizing the plantations, which might have been a progressive measure had it been carried out differently, plantation land was distributed to Sinhalese government supporters under the Land Reform Law in 1972 and 1975. Tamil plantation workers and their families were assaulted and driven out, their dwellings looted and burned; some were killed and others were left to starve.

The 1972 Republican Constitution-presided over, ironically, by Marxist Minister of Constitutional Affairs Colvin R. de Silva-not only gave constitutional status to Sinhala as the sole official language, but also provided a special place to Buddhism, and omitted the protection of minority rights; it defined Sri Lanka as a “unitary state,” which thus became synonymous with a “Sinhala-Buddhist state” The new constitution also omitted the second chamber of Parliament, the independent Public

Service Commission (intended to guarantee impartiality in public service appointments), and the Judicial Service Commission (intended to guarantee the independence and integrity of the judiciary). Judicial review of legislation was also prohibited. Thus, in addition to further depriving minorities of their rights, the new constitution centralized power in a manner that could be used against the majority of Sinhalese.

## **The Destruction of Democracy**

J. R. Jayawardene, leader of the UNP that came to power in 1977, engaged in a wholesale neoliberal transformation of the economy and enacted a new constitution, omitting the right to life and further centralizing power in the hands of one person, the Executive President. Thereafter, attacks on democracy followed thick and fast. Previously SLFP politicians had used lumpen gangs to terrorize the population, but these had no institutionalized status. After 1977, Jayawardene set up the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS or National Workers' Union), which carried out similar functions on behalf of the government on a larger scale as an organized and centralized force. These gangs were used to intimidate voters in the October 1982 presidential elections, from which Jayawardene's main rival, Mrs. Bandaranaike, was barred. When, despite this, Jayawardene got only 52.91% of votes cast, he used massive violence to push through a referendum by which the citizens of Sri Lanka supposedly voted to disenfranchise themselves by canceling the general elections scheduled for 1983!

JSS gangs were used to intimidate and kill opposition supporters and judges who gave verdicts against UNP criminals. They were used repeatedly against workers and trade unions to break strikes, assault and kill trade unionists, get members of existing unions dismissed, and even abuse and assault management personnel who attempted to rein them in. That members of the JSS had protection from the very top was obvious from the fact that the police never acted against them, while around 80,000 public employees who opposed them and went on strike lost their jobs. It has been suggested that this organization compares with the storm troopers in Hitler's Germany, and certainly in its mode of operation vis-à-vis the labor movement and opposition parties, as well as its relationship to the ruling party and police, the JSS resembled an amalgam of the fascist storm troops and "unions" of Hitler and Mussolini.

The parallel with fascist storm troops is most striking in the way the JSS was used to assault and kill Tamils, loot and burn their shops and homes, and drive them out of the areas where they lived. The anti-Tamil pogroms of 1977 started just a month after the UNP took office. Then in May 1981, violence broke out in Jaffna, and the targets of widespread arson attacks included the Jaffna Public Library, with its 95,000 volumes and priceless manuscripts. This was followed by island-wide pogroms against Tamils, which were only over-shadowed by the even more gruesome massacres of 1983, which left thousands of Tamils dead. This violence was claimed to be a spontaneous response to the killing of thirteen soldiers by Tamil militants, but there is ample evidence that the 1983 pogrom was carefully planned and state-sponsored. Simultaneously, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979) and provisions of the Public Security Act were used as a cover for the torture, disappearance, and killing of thousands of Tamils by the state.

The pogroms of 1983 converted a simmering conflict into a civil war. This was a direct consequence of the Left's abandonment of Sri Lankan working-class solidarity in the 1960s, which allowed extreme right-wing Sinhala nationalist forces to become enormously powerful while robbing the working class of the capacity to resist. Tamil socialists were demoralized. Many drifted into Tamil nationalist parties and militant groups, some were later killed or driven into exile by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or Tamil Tigers).

This was the background against which the Indo-Lanka Accord was signed by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayawardene in July 1987. While recognizing the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, it also affirmed the country's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious character. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was enacted to make Tamil an official language and provide for limited devolution of power to the provinces, and the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) occupied the North-East. But within three months, fighting broke out between the LTTE and IPKF, with Tamil civilians caught in the crossfire.

Meanwhile, in the South, the state was embroiled in a violent confrontation with the JVP, whose ideology was a mixture of socialism and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. It had launched an insurrection in 1987 to oppose the Accord. The JVP's leader, Wijeweera, had earlier been in the Ceylon Communist Party (Peking Wing), and in 1966 was disciplined by the party for his participation in demonstrations against the Senanayake-Chelvanayakam pact that provided for the official use of Tamil and regional devolution of power. Later, Wijeweera led the JVP to take the position that Tamil plantation workers were an arm of Indian expansionism, and should therefore be repatriated to India. They were also characterized by a putchist conception of revolution and an authoritarian party structure. After the 1971 insurrection was defeated, many survivors engaged in a critique of the authoritarian and chauvinist elements in the JVP's ideology and left the party.

By 1986, most of those who remained in the JVP, still led by Wijeweera, were hardline Sinhala nationalists. Their response to those who opposed them inside or outside the organization was invariably violent. The state, controlled by the UNP, was no less ruthless and far more powerful. This is what resulted in the gruesome atrocities and massive death toll (estimated at 40,000-60,000) during the second JVP insurgency, which ended with the execution of Wijeweera in November 1989. On the pretext of fighting the JVP, government death squads killed unarmed critics, political rivals, and even dissidents within the UNP, and this repression went on even after the JVP was defeated. By then, the presidency had been taken over by Premadasa, who opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord. Keen to expel the Indian army, Premadasa supplied the LTTE with arms, ammunition and cement for bunkers. After the Indians withdrew their troops in 1990, hostilities between the Sri Lankan armed forces and LTTE broke out again.

### **Tamil Nationalism: A Parallel Trajectory**

Soon after the 1972 constitution was enacted, various Tamil parties, including the FP (led by S. J. V. Chelvanayakam and A. Amirthalingam), the CWC (representing hill-country Tamils), and the Tamil Congress, came together in the Tamil United Front (TUF). The TUF became the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in May 1976, after adopting a resolution calling for a separate Tamil state. However, Alfred Duraiappah, several times mayor of Jaffna and a popular figure among the urban poor, aligned himself with the SLFP, led by Mrs. Bandaranaike, and argued for unity between people of the North and the South. From 1972, the FP launched vicious attacks on Duraiappah, calling him a traitor worthy of death, and in 1975 he was shot dead by assassins, one of whom eventually became supreme leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran. It is significant that the call for his execution was made by the supposedly non-violent leadership of the FP.

Later, the annihilation of the TULF leadership, including the murder of TULF leaders Amirthalingam and Yogeswaran by the LTTE in Colombo in 1989, was strongly reminiscent of the murder of Bandaranaike by Buddhist monks. Just as Bandaranaike had done, the TULF leaders had created a Frankenstein's monster which eventually destroyed them. The LTTE also destroyed many others supposedly fighting for the same goal, a separate state of Tamil Eelam. Wholesale massacres of the cadres and leadership of TELO (Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation), EPRLF (Eelam People's

Revolutionary Liberation Front, socialist in orientation) and other groups wiped out the LTTE's potential rivals. Tamil civilians who dissented from LTTE policies were also killed, especially those who rejected the goal of a separate Tamil state. These victims included leading figures in the fight for Tamil women's rights, Rajani Thiranagama (1989) and Maheshwari Velauthan (2008). Within the LTTE, there was complete subjection to the totalitarian rule of the leader, Prabhakaran. Anyone who disagreed with Prabhakaran or posed a challenge to him was branded a traitor and killed, typically after incarceration and torture. Just as the inherent authoritarianism of Sinhala nationalism expressed itself in the brutal repression of Sinhalese, the inherent authoritarianism of Tamil nationalism expressed itself in the brutal repression of Tamils.

However, Prabhakaran made a fatal mistake when he tried to liquidate Karuna Amman, his Eastern commander, who expressed dissatisfaction with LTTE policies in 2004. Despite a confrontation in which hundreds of Karuna's supporters were killed, Prabhakaran failed to destroy Karuna himself, who then formed the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP or Tamil People's Liberation Tigers) and teamed up with the government of Sri Lanka to defeat the LTTE. Karuna's defection illustrates another feature of Tamil nationalism: its marginalization and exclusion of large sections of Tamil-speaking people. One of the Eastern commander's complaints was the marginalization of Eastern Tamils. The Tamil nationalist agenda of the LTTE also excluded some of the most oppressed Tamils, hill-country Tamils and Tamil Dalits (ex-untouchables). It also engaged in massacres and large-scale ethnic cleansing of Tamil-speaking Muslims.

Given the reactionary character of the LTTE, it is all the more anomalous that some Sinhalese leftists who had refused to make concessions to Sinhala nationalism now gave critical support to the LTTE. For independent Tamil socialists opposed to the LTTE, this meant the loss of the solidarity of their Sinhalese comrades. Since the pretext for this betrayal was the "right of nations to self-determination," it is worth examining this issue in some depth in the context of Sri Lanka.

### **The Right to Self-Determination**

To this day there remains near-universal acceptance among Marxists of Stalin's definition of a nation as a "historically-constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." While it is doubtful whether there exists any nation on earth answering to these specifications, this monocultural ideal of a nation is certainly cherished by fascists everywhere, including the Nazis. Achieving it in most countries would entail marginalizing or eliminating minorities by methods ranging from assimilation to ethnic cleansing and genocide. Still, this is the definition of a nation we must keep in mind when evaluating the Lenin-Luxemburg debate on the right of nations to self-determination, defined as the right to a separate state.

Apart from a reactionary minority, Marxists from Marx and Engels onwards supported national independence for the colonies. While West European countries acquired their colonies abroad, Tsarist Russia annexed many neighboring lands and the debate arose in connection with a clause in the Russian Marxists' program dealing with these peoples. In the ensuing debate, Lenin took the position that the clause referred specifically to Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it and its neighboring countries were going through national movements. He insisted on the right of nations like the Ukraine to have separate states, and contended that denial of this right would merely strengthen Great Russian nationalism. Luxemburg disagreed even with the phrase "right of nations to self-determination," asking, Who determines the will of the nation? Her fear was that right-wing nationalists would be supported by socialists, to the detriment of the working class.



Luxemburg made it clear that socialists, being opposed to all oppression, were duty-bound to oppose national oppression. Lenin, on his side, conceded that the prime consideration was self-determination of the proletariat, and that “no Russian Marxist has ever thought of blaming the Polish Social-Democrats for being opposed to the secession of Poland.” Both these theorists opposed nationalism, Lenin in imperialist Russia, Luxemburg in oppressed Poland; the main goal for both was the advancement of revolutionary international socialism. So why did the disagreement arise? Surely because both tried to elevate a contextual policy into a universal one. It is vitally important for socialists to oppose imperialist oppression, as in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. Indeed, all oppression of one nation by another should be opposed. But the demand for an ethnically or religiously “pure” state of the sort that the Taliban has been trying to construct is a reactionary demand by parties hostile to the working class movement. As such, it deserves no support from socialists, especially in Sri Lanka where, despite areas where one community or the other might predominate, Tamils are dispersed within a population comprising other minorities as well as Sinhalese, with mixed workplaces, neighborhoods, and even families. A genuinely working class program in such a context opposes all forms of oppression and fights a unified battle for workers’ rights, as in the LSSP’s program in Sri Lanka immediately after Independence.

There was, in fact, an ideal opportunity for launching such a struggle in 1994, when a left-of-centre People’s Alliance (PA) government and President Chandrika Kumaratunga were elected to power on a platform of peace with justice for Tamils. After decades of extreme right-wing repression, the government restored democratic rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the right to form unions and engage in collective bargaining in the parts of the country under its control. A new constitution was drafted by a Tamil MP and legal expert, Neelan Thiruchelvam, and an undertaking was initiated to give parity to Tamil, make discrimination illegal, devolve much more power to the provinces than under the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and do away with the dictatorial Executive Presidency. A ceasefire was declared to negotiate a political settlement with the LTTE. But the LTTE broke the ceasefire and restarted the war in 1995. In 1999, they assassinated Thiruchelvam and tried to do the same to President Kumaratunga. Yet throughout this period sections of the Left in Sri Lanka and elsewhere continued to give critical support to the LTTE and its agenda. After another ceasefire agreement was signed in 2002 a new peace process was started with the mediation of the Norwegian government. Again there was a mood of reconciliation in the country and an offer of a federal solution from the government in fresh negotiations. Again, Prabhakaran scuppered it, assassinating more of his Tamil opponents to tighten his stranglehold on Sri Lankan Tamil politics.

On each of these occasions, the LTTE used the ceasefires to kill critics and dissidents, and prepare for war. Preparations for war included forced conscription of thousands of child soldiers, a feature that characterized the LTTE throughout its career. In the last stages of the war, press-gangs were sent out with quotas for the number of children they had to abduct, failing which they themselves would be sent to the front line. Parents adopted desperate measures to evade these press-gangs.

How can we explain Left support for the LTTE in such circumstances? This is a typical example of doctrinalism: the dogmatic application of a formula (in this case, the right of nations to self-determination) in a context where it is completely inappropriate. The LTTE’s agenda of a separate state of Tamil Eelam was reactionary, and Luxemburg’s caveat was eminently applicable. Yet many leftists, including Fourth Internationalists, despite having a presence in Sri Lanka which should have alerted them to the widespread existence of mixed communities and to the fact that Tamil nationalism simply reinforced Sinhala nationalism, were unable to engage in a concrete analysis of the situation and come up with a genuinely socialist alternative.

Thus during the carnage at the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, some socialists supported the LTTE even while it was using civilians as human shields. Others were part of a government bombing and shelling of those same civilians! Unless sections of the Left which have aligned themselves with

Sinhala nationalism as well as those who have aligned themselves with Tamil nationalism return to internationalist working-class politics, engage in a concrete analysis of Sri Lanka in its global context, and reformulate their program accordingly, the crisis in that country is likely to continue, albeit in a different form from the dreadful civil war that has just ended.

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From The Platypus Associated Society

<http://platypus1917.org/2009/07/01/the-role-of-socialists-in-the-civil-war-in-sri-lanka/>