

Sri Lanka: The Voice of Conscience amid the Populist Uproar: Politics and Popular Ideologies

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The various Tamil movements that emerged in Sri Lanka in the 1970s ranged across a broad political spectrum, whether inspired by Marxist ideology or by the Tamil ethnic-nationalism espoused by parties like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). By the late 1980s, members of these Tamil militant movements experienced deep ethical dilemmas as they encountered violent retaliation from the Sri Lankan state, rival movements, and sometimes even their fellow members. In this essay I trace how everyday ethical dilemmas generated by having to enact violence against fellow activists produced the limits of militant [populism](#). In particular, I examine how specifically the LTTE's attempts to institute authoritarian structures of power in lieu of a more [democratic process](#) were ultimately thwarted by the refusal of some of its members to carry out the purifying violence it demanded. To illustrate this argument, let me begin with the stories of Ravi, a Tamil activist whose killing was ordered by the LTTE when he disagreed with it, and the LTTE militant who was supposed to execute this order.

Persuaded by its ideology, Ravi joined a Marxist Tamil militant movement in the early 1980s. He disagreed with the LTTE's Tamil nationalist political position and conducted political classes among the masses to disseminate Marxist ideology instead. One day, early in the morning at the start of the inter-militant conflict in the eighties, a man came to Ravi's house and asked him to step outside. Ravi knew him as an LTTE militant in charge of that area. They had met a few times before, but since they belonged to different groups their encounters had never been smooth. Ravi thought that perhaps the LTTE militant had come to kill him. Instead, the person let Ravi know that he had been ordered to kill him, but that the murder was due to take place three hours later, when he would come back with his fellow cadres. Before walking away, the man advised Ravi to flee. Ravi left the house immediately and eventually managed to escape from Sri Lanka. Now he has been in exile for more than twenty years. He still thinks that the LTTE militant offered him the possibility to flee because, ultimately, they all believed in the same dream. He said that he would have done the same.

Militancy for Tamil minority rights began in the 1970s, but escalated after the 1983 ethnic riots, and eventually developed into a civil war that lasted till 2009. Many observers of Sri Lankan politics argue that the 1983 ethnic riots against Tamils ignited the violent ethnic conflict that led to the death of numerous Tamils and the displacement of many others. However, the roots of the ethnic conflict stretched back to language policies privileging Sinhala and other forms of [discrimination against the Tamil minority](#) (Cheran 2009). Tamil militant/youth movements that emerged to fight for rights and justice were a radical departure from old ways of doing politics; they were typically rooted either in Marxist ideology (that is, viewing the conflict in terms of class and ethnic struggle) or in Tamil nationalism (seeing the conflict as a manifestation of Tamil language nationalism and the desire for an independent Tamil state) (Maunaguru 2020).

After the 1983 anti-Tamil ethnic riots, the LTTE gained widespread popularity and became the leading Tamil nationalist movement because it wielded spectacular violence rooted in an emotionally charged Tamil popular nationalism built on notions of valor, fear, and yearning for an independent nation. Groups espousing this ethnic-nationalist ideology proved to be far more attractive than militant movements founded on Marxist ideology, which focused on class struggle and fought for workers' solidarity across ethnic lines, emphasizing the common suffering that workers faced due to the escalation of violence. In addition to ideological popularity, the [fear of violence both from the state and the LTTE](#) created the conditions for the consolidation of a majoritarian Tamil nationalistic politics.

Populist Tamil nationalist ideology was at the heart of the LTTE's project of sovereignty. Driven by this ideology, the LTTE sought to establish [its own military, administrative and judicial institutions, and power](#) in certain parts of the North and East of Sri Lanka; these stayed in place until the LTTE was finally defeated in 2009. Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, was believed to [embody the Tamil Eelam](#) (Tamil independent state). Anyone who questioned his authority was deemed as also having betrayed the Tamil people. The LTTE's project of sovereignty targeted fellow Tamil activists (and their families) who were not an active part of this project or stood against it. Sharika Thiranagama (2010) argues that the term "traitor" was repeatedly used by the LTTE to justify killing and punishing fellow comrades. Popular ethnic-Tamil nationalism thus thrived on the notions of the visible enemy outside of the Tamil community *and* [invisible traitors](#) within the Tamil community. LTTE's ethnic-Tamil nationalism and its entanglement with violence and authoritarianism radically transformed the political space that had drawn a large number of Tamil youth to fight for justice, freedom, and rights for minorities. By late 1986, the LTTE had established itself as the sole Tamil militant movement in Sri Lanka by eliminating the other Tamil militant movements.

However, it was the call to kill or punish their intimate others who stood against the militant ethnic-Tamil nationalist project that led a number of militant activists to either leave their movements and go into exile or quietly circumvent orders, as Ravi's killer had done. They found that this project of purification, and the effects it had on their relationships with friends, comrades, and community members, weighed heavily on their conscience. Political dissent, then, was not just abstract individual support for an ideology, removed from personal ties, but embedded in the [thickness of relationality](#) with others (friends and fellow activists) whether known or unknown.

Thus, populist militant Tamil nationalism met its limit—due to its use of excessive violence and authoritarian practices—during the inter-militant conflicts. Sometimes these acts of dissent came in the form of public writings and speeches that were outspoken in their stance against such populist Tamil nationalism. However, at other times, the acts of dissent were more subtle and personal. These invisible moments, unspoken gestures, and acts of refusal against nationalistic populist politics in the everyday living with others may shed a different light on the limits of political populism.

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