The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, ethnicity, political economy

Reviewed by Clyde Sanger


Abstract

Professor Bandarage sets out very clearly from the start of her excellent 223-page book her major thesis, and then skillfully guides the reader – or at least this reader – into acceptance of her view of the most likely solution to this vicious 25-year civil war. Her major thesis is that many, too many, analysts and writers have opted for the simplistic bipolar description of the conflict: at one pole the Sri Lanka government, dominated by Sinhala ministers and heavily influenced by Buddhist priests, and at the other the minority Tamil population (some 18 % of the total according the last national census held in 1981) who have suffered discrimination culturally and economically virtually since independence in 1948.

It really wasn’t a difficult task to demolish this bipolar model. Hardly any conflict situation is that simple. In the case of Sri Lanka, she needed only to mention the third ethnic group, the Moors of Muslim faith, who overall may only amount to 6 % of total population but, even after all the fighting, make up about one-third of the peoples in Eastern province, a strategic part of the island’s make-up since the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, also known as the Tamil Tigers) has claimed it as integral part of the Tamil Homeland, giving the Tamils two-thirds of the island’s coastline. Another one-third of the province’s population is Sinhala, and these facts lead Professor Bandarage to refer continuously, when it embraces the Eastern province as well as the Northern province, to “the fictitious Tamil Homeland concept”.

She includes an interesting early chapter about the period of British administration (1796-1948), in which she argues that the colonial power favoured the advancement of Tamils over the Sinhala population in education and professional training, and the much criticized legislation by the government – the 1954 Education Ordinance and the 1956 Official Language Act – was aimed to bring an end to the Tamil entrenchment in the civil service and in the ranks of doctors and engineers. Some of this legislation was later revoked, either under pressure or because its purpose was fulfilled of opening opportunities to the majority.

There are many other events – disasters, massacres, misunderstandings, deceptions in this sorry history of a once-blessed isle – that point up the complications and negate the bipolar model. Nevertheless, with tactical political skill, a mixture of charisma and ruthlessness, and plain luck, the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has managed not only to survive decades of warfare but achieve the merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces, inflict heavy losses on both Sri Lankan forces and units of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) and build up extraordinary influence and financial support among the Tamil diaspora in Europe and Canada.

To mention briefly some of these complications to the bipolar model that Mr. Prabhakaran has used to present the Tamils as victims of an aggressive Sinhala Buddhist government. Although precise figures are
unavailable, it seems certain that more Sinhalese, military and civilian, died in the suppression of the JVP insurgency led by well-educated youth frustrated in poverty in the Southern Province than Sri Lanka forces inflicted on the Tamil rebels in the north; also that the Tigers, in their march to power over more moderate Tamils, have killed more of their own folk than they have dispatched of the government’s forces.

Stir into this witches’ brew the caste system among Tamils that has led the Tigers to recruit child soldiers from poorer families; the several cease-fires used for rearming or killings until abrogated by one side or the other; the clumsy intervention for three years of the 100,000-strong IPKF; the to-and-fro policies of successive Sri Lankan presidents (sometimes militant, sometime conciliatory), and the equally maladroit and mostly misguided efforts towards peace of outsiders – the Norwegian government, church groups and international NGOs – and one can only be amazed at how many elements have conspired to make the Sri Lanka civil war such an indictment of all parties. There are really no political heroes.

I will leave the distressing details to readers who want to get to all the buried or charred bones. There are plenty of those, for an estimated 40,000 people died in the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or People’s Liberation Front) uprising in the south, on top of the 70,000 who have perished in the campaigns and massacres to capture or defend Jaffna and the north. More political leaders than probably in any other country have been assassinated on the island, where the Tigers invented the body-pack for young suicide bombers. Also best left to the specialist are the contradictory policies of the Indian government and of Tamil Nadu state (seen by Colombo as a latent threat to its sovereignty because of its 50 million people). Professor Bandarage argues that the Tamil Nadu state leaders have been encouraging a “surrogate campaign” for separatism, having been thwarted by Delhi’s tightening the constitution to forbid secession in India. The conspiracies and the complications multiply.

What solution would the author offer today, writing from her perch at Georgetown University? Her book was finished before this latest campaign by Sri Lanka government forces under President Mahinda Rajapakse to eliminate the last stronghold of the Tigers, although it describes the frustrated attempts he made at negotiation after the failure of the Norwegian initiative. He has refused to accept a cease-fire offer and seems intent on finishing off the Tigers’ military strength. Will the moderate Tamils pluck up courage, claim (probably correctly) to speak for the war-weary majority and accept a form of devolution that guarantees provincial councils a range of powers over education, language, religion and taxing powers? This is clearly the author’s preference. One fact is certain: Sri Lanka faces an exceptional opportunity to end this appalling conflict, and the government should expend as much energy and communication skills on the Tamil diaspora, to persuade those in Toronto, London and elsewhere that it is sincerely intent on a peace fair to all. This book should help.

About the Author

Clyde Sanger is a Canadian journalist and writer on international affairs. He has been twice invited to the University for Peace as a visiting professor in the Media and Conflict Studies programme.