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The Tamil National Question

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Last year [1981] a major wave of guerilla struggle broke out in Sri Lanka, followed by widespread rioting. It was just ten years after the youthful JVP insurrection shattered forever the peaceful image of an island which had achieved its independence without any major mass struggles at all. Now once again a youth-led armed struggle is brewing, only the struggle now centers not for an immediate social revolution but for the national liberation of the Tamil minority. As economic crisis, social clashes, and political repression intensify, over 30 years of discrimination and riots by the majority Sinhalese Buddhists against the Tamil Hindus have resulted in a growing movement for a separate Tamil nation of "Eelam" in the northern part of the island.

The demand for Eelam was first made by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) at its first convention in 1976, replacing the original six-point program for democratic rights for Tamils in a single secular state under pressure from below. When the TULF became the sole parliamentary representative of the Tamils and thus the second largest party in the country and went on to compromise this demand, a militant underground organization, the Liberation Tigers, sprang up. Since 1979 the Tigers began to organize killings of Sinhala police and Tamil "traitors," and an upsurge in killings led in August 1981 to a major riot by the Sinhalese against Tamils throughout the island, in which dozens were killed and hundreds rendered homeless.

Repression and internal dissension have almost destroyed the Liberation Tigers since then. But Tamil nationalism continues to express itself with the rise of new organizations, including the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front (TELF), the Tamil Illaignar Eravai (Liberation Front) and Tamil-based communist organizations. It appears that both bourgeois parties and the revolutionary left in Sri Lanka are thoroughly split on national lines.

The situation is complicated even further by the fact that nearly half the Tamils in Sri Lanka are "Indian Tamils." In addition the 6.5 percent of the population who are Muslims also speak Tamil but do not identify so far with the Hindu Tamils. Plantation workers and descendents of plantation workers brought over by the British, the majority of these were rendered stateless by the 1948 constitution. India agreed in a pact to take most of these back, but so far the 300,000 who have returned have spent much of their time in camps, with no homes, no jobs, no land in India itself. About 150,000 have been given Sri Lanka citizenship, but the 600,000 remaining are without any rights in Sri Lanka itself, expecting to be resettled in India but with little guarantee of security here. With their own tradition of trade-union organizing these workers whom many call the "hard core of the Ceylon proletariat" have had little real contact with either the Sinhalese left or the "Sri Lanka Tamils" whose homeland is the northern part of the Island, and have not yet emerged with any political voice at all.

The 1981 rioting has had several major repercussions. First, the international complication of the "Tamil national question" was revealed when resulting anti-Sinhalese demonstrations in neighboring Tamil Nadu resulted in deaths from self-immolation after Karunanidhi, the leader of the demonstrations, was arrested. Tamil rebels from Sri Lanka have to some extent used India as a base, and their popular support was demonstrated when five Liberation Tiger leaders were captured by Indian police last May and found support from nearly all the political parties in Tamil Nadu against their extradition.

Another result of the riots was heightened anti-terrorist legislation. Such laws as the Public Security Act and the Essential Services Act now enable the government to declare strikes illegal, ban any political party advocating violence, and detain accused persons anywhere without trial and with little recourse to the courts. The most recent law, which gives the executive powers to decide where accused can be kept in custody, came after the Supreme Court ruled that Tamil youths detained and tortured in an army camp, should be placed in the custody of the judges in a remand prison or jail.

In addition, Sri Lanka under the leadership of the right-wing UNP has been instituting a presidential system

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that perhaps may be a model for Indira Gandhi's own aspirations—giving the executive what President Jayawardene himself has described as the "power of a king." Jayawardene who is ready to use such powers ruthlessly has declared a state of Emergency several times on the island since coming to power (once in 1979 in the Tamil northern area; once in 1980 to repress a general strike, once following the 1981 riots, and again in 1982 following Sinhala–Muslim rioting), and has deprived his most powerful bourgeois political opponent, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, of her citizenship rights.

Clearly the Sri Lanka bourgeois state is using the slogan of "anti-terrorism" to acquire powers to crush any kind of popular revolt or powerful mass movements. Nevertheless, the fact that popular discontent is increasingly taking a national form, in Sri Lanka as well as in India among the Nagas, Mizos, Assamese and others or in Pakistan among all the non-Punjabi nationalities, is one example of a major aspect of the revolutionary situation in the world today.

Historical Conflicts Intensified by Colonialism

While Sri Lanka's path of development has intensified the current Tamil-Sinhala conflict, its roots lie deep in Ceylonese history itself.

Who the original inhabitants of the island were is not known. But Tamil-speaking Dravidians (who were at one time spread over most of India and perhaps a part of the middle east as well) were very likely on the island at the time of the Sinhalese arrival—around 5th century BC. The fact is that while the Sinhalese-Tamil difference is conceptualized as a racial division between Aryans and Dravidians, such a racial-linguistic identification is as risky in the Ceylon case as elsewhere. From the beginning the Sinhala-speakers maintained close connections with the neighboring Dravidians, connections that included commerce and marriage as much as warfare, with the Sinhala elite taking wives and skilled artisans from the Tamil kingdoms in India.

Thus Tamils had a constant presence on the island, and India-based Tamil kingdoms occasionally invaded it. But it was only in the 13th century, in a period of decline of the Sinhala Buddhist kingdoms, that an independent Tamil feudal state could consolidate itself in Jaffna in the northern part of the island.

Ceylon had one of the longest colonial histories of any Asian nation, being conquered first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British. But its economy remained an export-oriented plantation economy, based first on cinnamon and spices, then on coffee, and finally on tea and rubber. Little industry developed and thus the industrial proletariat and native bourgeoisie remained minuscule. Instead, with the British owning most of the plantations and controlling all of trade and finance, a mainly comprador Ceylonese bourgeoisie grew up, along with a numerous petty-bourgeoisie centered on the highly developed educational and social welfare system funded especially after the 1930s by the profits from the plantations.

As a result, there was little anti-imperialist mass movement. In contrast to the Indian National Congress, the Ceylonese bourgeoisie organized no mass-based political party, and independence was granted "from above" with little agitation. As a result the Ceylon workers and peasants, whether Sinhalese Buddhist, Tamil Hindu, or Tamil-speaking Muslims, had almost no experience of common struggle against oppression.

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At the same time colonial rule actively acerbated communal conflict. This began with imperialist alliances that used and intensified rivalry between Tamil and Sinhalese kingdoms, but it was most uniquely fostered by the plantation economy itself. As always, local peasants (in this case the Sinhalese) who had any lands of their own to maintain themselves refused to work under the brutally exploitative conditions of the plantations. The British then turned to outsiders, importing mainly scheduled caste, debt-bound laborers from nearby Tamil Nadu. Conditions were so bad that for a long period nearly one fourth of such migrant laborers died within a few years; yet the Sinhalese peasants bitterly blamed the loss of their lands on the laborers as well as the planters, seeing them as part of a single alien economic system.

Finally, the petty bourgeoisie that developed under colonial rule fostered a cultural revivalism that substituted for a genuine mass-based national culture. Among the Tamils this took the form of a Brahmanic, Saivite Hindu revivalism, and among the Sinhalese of emphasizing their Buddhist anti-Tamil identity. This became so extreme that the first volume of the "Freedom of Lanka" history series, published in 1946, dealt with "The Struggle Against the Tamils" and focused on the now highly emotive and symbolic struggle of Duttagamini, a 5th century Sinhala king who defeated a supposed Tamil conqueror in a battle that has become a near-mythic symbol of the cultural oppositions in Ceylonese society. Thus the whole colonial period left the island with a heritage of economic and cultural disunity rather than forging any common national, anti-imperialist spirit. The objective and historical bases for unity—Tamil-Sinhala economic and social exchanges and cultural borrowings, Tamil low-caste resistance to Brahmanic Hinduism, peasant anti-feudal struggles—were all overlooked. Strikingly also, Buddhism which in India itself has been (and continues to be seen as) part of a low-caste, equalitarian and non-Brahmanical tradition, came to be experienced by even poor and low-caste Tamils as an alien and oppressive cultural force.

Independence: State Capitalism and Sinhala Chauvinism

Independence came without touching British economic

holdings at all and brought into power the party of the westernized upper classes, the United National Party (UNP), committed from the beginning to an "open economy." The UNP did nothing for industrialization or land reform other than "colonization" projects to plant peasants on new lands. It maintained the colonial policy of parity of Tamil and Sinhala as official languages, but its Sinhala chauvinism was shown when it (and every other political party) accepted the mass disenfranchisement of the "Indian Tamil" plantation laborers in the 1948 constitution. This was done by the simple expedient of placing the burden of proof of citizenship by descent or registration on all those with Tamil names in the central Ceylon area, and few of the illiterate plantation laborers, even those who had lived in the islands for decades, could provide such proof.

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The reaction to the comprador orientation of UNP policy came in 1956, the 2500th anniversary of the death of Buddha which served as a focus for rising religious-national emotions of the Sinhalese. A new class was coming to the fore, based on the rural elite of landlords, rich peasants, school-teachers, monks, ayurvedic physicians—an aspiring bourgeoisie, rural based but without the ties to the plantation economy of the westernized elite, ready to use state capitalist policies to aid its economic advance, and a combination of "socialist" rhetoric and Sinhala chauvinism to solidify its social support.

The upsurge of this class was expressed through a new party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and through a single slogan, "Sinhala only." The party, orgnized by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (himself a member of the elite who converted to Buddhism and took up native dress to identify with the new class), expressed in its very name the new religious identification of the island that had been known as Ceylon. And the slogan expressed the antagonism of educated and semi-educated young Sinhalese who felt that the continuing role of English and Tamil was leaving them at a disadvantage in education and employment.

Anti-Tamil rioting swept the island, and after the SLFP came to power the "linguistic disenfranchisement" of the Tamils followed. The result was that between 1956 and 1970 the percentage of Tamils in the administrative service declined from 30 percent to 5 percent, in the clerical service from 50 percent to 5 percent, and in the professions from 60 percent to 10 percent.

Worse yet, the left parties of Ceylon fell victim to Sinhala chauvinism. At that point there were two, the Trotskyite Lama Sama Samaj Party (LSSP) and the pro-Moscow Communist Party. Both had won a fair base among the Sinhala working class and peasantry and together won 20 percent of the vote in the 1947 election. But they had done little to really base party organization among the masses, and were accused by the young radicals of the 1970s for having done little or nothing to even publish Marxist texts in the vernacular languages. On this background, they began with a vague democratic support for Tamil-Sinhala linguistic parity, but under the pressure of the rising Sinhala political force they changed it to support for "Sinhala only." First the CP in 1960 and then the LSSP in 1963 joined the SLFP in a united front on the argument of supporting a "progressive" national bourgeoisie against the rightist UNP. It is noteworthy that none of these parties or their immediate successors (various Maoist and Trotskyite splits began to occur in reaction to the SLFP alliance) ever discussed or analyzed the Tamil-Sinhala problem as a national question. This began to enter the thinking of Marxist intellectuals only after the Tamils themselves brought the issue to the fore in the 1970s.

The SLFP-LSSP-CP united front undertook the first land reforms in Ceylon; but these were applied mainly to plantations, not to the landlord or rich peasant-owned ricelands. It nationalized some banks, transport and the port of Colombo. It started a few new industries and instituted strong exchange controls and licensing procedures to encourage the local bourgeoisie. But while these measures could enable some bourgeois consolidation, they could not, obviously, solve the economic crisis hitting the island or provide jobs for the increasing numbers of educated youths turned out by the nation's schools, especially with Sri Lanka having one of the highest illiteracy rates of any third world nation (78 percent in 1971).

But the leftist rhetoric fuelled the growing aspirations of the people, and discontent was expressed both in rising strikes and demonstrations by the working class (often against the wishes of their "left" leaders who were trying to maneuvre within the government) and in Tamil-Sinhala riots. Then in 1971 a new explosion shook the island.

This was the revolt of the JVP (Janata Vimukti Peramuna, or National Liberation Front). The JVP's organization expressed the leftward turn of innumerable rural and urban petty-bourgeois Sinhala youths, and their frustrations with the traditional left parties whose leadership had remained in the hands of the westernized elite and whose politics had remained parliamentary and tailist. Organizers first worked underground, moving throughout the island for some years to build a mass base among the peasantry, then "critically" supported the SLFP in the 1970 elections. Then, as their mass base and militancy and the resulting state repression began to grow, with the example of the 1965 Indonesian massacre of communists before them on one side and the model of Che Guevara on the other, they decided on a policy of insurrection.

The JVP had no real Leninist party structure or working class base, and its politics were clearly adventurist. Worse yet, while it reacted against the revisionism of the established Marxist parties, it shared their Sinhala chauvinism; its famous "five lectures" characterized the Tamil plantation laborers as a part of "Indian expansionism" and called for their repatriation "by force if necessary." It also accused the Tamils of being "nationalists," a conceptualization that reflected the lack of serious Marxist thinking in the island on this issue. Nevertheless over 15,000 young

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people (and some estimate up to 50,000) paid with their lives in the brutal suppression of the revolt, it marked a turning point not only for Sri Lanka but also in the international left movement as well. For nearly all the nations of the world, including post-revolutionary societies (with the exception of North Korea), provided immediate material aid to the government, and Zhou Enlai's letter of support to Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike was a major factor leading to disillusionment with Chinese foreign policy in the post-cultural revolutionary period. The continuing fragmentation on the revolutionary left in Sri Lanka and every other country have their roots in such actions.

Searching for Direction

The brutal repression of the revolt, the subsequent failure of the JVP to regroup, and the continued neglect of the Tamil national question left a revolutionary vacuum in Sri Lanka politics. Splits occurred in every major left party, with the Trotskyites and pro-China communists dividing into several groups. The JVP itself first fragmented and then was taken over by an emerging Trotskyite section headed by one of its early main leaders, Rohan Wijiweera. The original JVP had never been Trotskyite but more or less followed the traditional communist line in its analysis of classes and the character of revolution; but there had been two strategical trends within it—the so-called "big blow" (insurrectionist) and "little blow" (protracted warfare). Following the repression differences intensified and there was even physical infighting in the jails before Wijiweera's group gained control to transform it into a parliamentary party noted for its sectarian refusal to unite with other sections of the left.

The positive aspect of this period was that a new generation as coming into the working class movement, many of them with the most bitter personal experiences of class struggle, raising new issues, studying the problems of the revolution in a new way and working among the masses in various organizations. But throughout the 1970s, no revolutionary vanguard could be born from this, and the split between Tamil and Sinhala masses and activists intensified.

In this absence of a revolutionary alternative, the Sinhalese maintained the SLFP in power until 1977, with its rhetoric of anti-imperialism and practice of state capitalism. Then, when their worsening economic condition showed no sign of improving, they reelected the UNP. The UNP promptly moved to "liberalize" the economy and "rationalize" the state system—on one hand dismantling exchange controls and licensing procedures and opening up the country to multinational capital and the World Bank–IMF, and on the other hand bringing in an amended constitution in 1978 to provide for a presidential system. Strikingly, though the SLFP's Sirimavo Bandaranaike has often been identified with Indira Gandhi, Bandaranaike's enemy Jayawardene was doing precisely what Indira Gandhi herself is now beginning to do: the changing policy is more a result of the changing needs of the bourgeoisie, not of a particular political party. Sri Lanka's model is now Singapore, the highly dictatorial but industrializing playground of the MNCs, and the UNP is going ahead with free trade zones and the capital-hungry Mahaveli irrigation-development project. Economic growth rates have risen temporarily, but little has so far trickled down to the masses, and even in the face of a divided opposition the UNP's fate is uncertain in the current elections.

The Tamils in turn threw all their support to the newly emerged TULF when it took up a program for equal rights and the call for "Eelam." When this party turned to moderation, the Liberation Tigers sprang up as a militant group, and now with the Tigers repressed and the TULF still discredited as too compromising, numerous new groups are coming to the forefront. Almost all of these have bourgeois or petty-bourgeois leadership, but Marxist-Leninist forces are also working among the Tamils. These include a breakaway faction from the pro-Peking Communist Party who have joined with other activists to organize the rural proletariat in the traditional areas of the "Ceylon Tamils." Their Rural Labour Union, which includes agricultural laborers, poor peasants and other unskilled rural laborers, is the first such organization of the rural poor in Sri Lanka—up to now the left had only organized "peasant unions" including rich peasants as well as landless laborers. A large number of Tamil scheduled caste laborers are included in this organization, and the RLU fights for a society free from caste oppression as well as class oppression and national oppression.

The division in the revolutionary left in Sri Lanka has so far left the fate of the country in the hands of the UNP and SLFP, the "right" and "left" hands of the bourgeoisie, both headed by the most elite of its sections. But this division itself has its basis, not so much in the international competition between "Trotskyites," "Maoists" and "revisionists" as in the inability to formulate a political line capable of handling the internal contradictions of Sri Lanka society. ★