Sri Lanka 1993–2005

Executive Summary

Since gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, the island nation of Sri Lanka has experienced episodic violence between its majority Sinhalese population and minority Tamils. Ethnic conflict and violence spread in the 1970s and 1980s. An array of Tamil groups consolidated under the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization against a Sinhalese government known for brutality against the Tamil minority. In the aftermath of ethnic riots in 1983, thousands of Tamil refugees fled Sri Lanka, creating a transnational support network for the LTTE insurgency.[1] India intervened militarily in 1987 via the Indian Peacekeeping Force, resulting in a three-year occupation. The force was widely viewed as a failure, leaving a battle-hardened LTTE largely in control of the northern region of the island.[2]

Between 1990 and 1993, the LTTE was responsible for several major attacks and high-profile assassinations, including the Indian prime minister and the Sri Lankan defense minister. In 1993, Sri Lankan counterinsurgency forces began a major offensive to take control of the Jaffna Peninsula and insurgent-held territory in the North, but by the end of the year nearly one-third of the Sri Lankan navy was destroyed and LTTE attacks continued.[3] Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the new Sri Lankan president, attempted to negotiate peace, but the talks broke down with new outbreaks of violence.[4] Major government offensives often followed the highly visible LTTE attacks on government centers and leadership, ultimately resulting in a stalemate. Both sides invested heavily in advanced weaponry, and a significant number of civilians died in the violence.[5] Kumaratunga reached out to Norway in 2000 to mediate a peace process that both sides roughly respected until 2002.[6]

In response to renewed incidents of violence in 2002, the Sri Lankan government began an integrated political and military strategy that involved the application of overwhelming force against insurgent strongholds. The turning point occurred in 2004 when prominent LTTE leader Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (a.k.a. "Colonel Karuna Amman") defected to support Sri Lankan forces.[7] Karuna took his Eastern Province army of between 5,000 and 6,000 fighters with him, and his knowledge of the LTTE and the defection of his forces turned the tide.[8] After Karuna's soldiers switched sides, the LTTE attempted to operate more as a conventional military rather than a guerrilla force. Aided by Karuna's intelligence network and now able to engage in decisive battles with the LTTE, Sri Lankan forces waged a conventional military campaign against the LTTE. On May 18, 2009, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, was killed by government forces in northeastern Sri Lanka, symbolizing the end of organized LTTE resistance.[9]

Assessing the Five Factors

1. **Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?**

    No → Yes. Language is the most symbolic divide in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese speakers make up 87 percent of the population of the island. Nevertheless, identity in Sri Lanka is complex. Shifts in allegiance within the fractured minority populations meant that Sri Lanka was right on the edge of being considered a nation that has "85 percent of the population expressing a national identity." The Sinhalese make up 75 percent of the population and the Tamils about 11 percent.[10] The Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) make up another 9 percent, and the remainder of the population includes a combination of smaller ethnic groups, including the Indian Tamils (4 percent), the Veddas (the indigenous people of Sri Lanka), Malay and Chinese immigrants, the Burghers (descendants of European colonists), and the Kaffirs, a small group descended from African immigrants brought to the island as forced laborers. Thus, there are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic religious identities in play as well. These minority populations aligned with different groups over time depending on political motivation or grievances. Society is also divided between urban and rural populations as well as socioeconomic class. The result is a polarized society with continually shifting allegiance. At its peak, the LTTE acted on behalf of the Tamil-speaking minority, representing as much as 25 percent of the population, but they were also known for violence toward other minorities, including the Sri Lankan Muslims.[11] By the end of the conflict, 85 percent of the population had aligned with the Sinhalese majority to oppose the Tamils.

2. **Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

    No → Yes. At the beginning of the conflict, less than 85 percent of the population recognized the Sinhalese government as legitimate. Elections resulted in multiple presidencies attempting to bridge the gap between ethnic Sinhalese and Tamils. The Sinhalese-speaking population represented a marginal 87 percent of the population, but language alone may not be the best indicator of government legitimacy; additionally, there is no data to show if some segment of the Tamil-speaking minority (up to 15 percent of the population) may have recognized the government as legitimate.[12] Karuna's defection to support Sri Lankan forces in 2004 marked a significant shift to pro-government support from the Tamil-speaking minority. Although difficult to measure, his defection to the government most likely provided the minimum 85 percent government legitimacy necessary for success.

3. **Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?**

    No → Yes. Initially, the Sri Lankan government forces had a reputation for "disordered brutality" that led to mass killings of civilians, primarily Tamils.[13] The Sri Lankan forces attempted to protect the ethnic Sinhalese, roughly 75 percent of the population, while engaging in violence against the Tamil minority.[14] In response, the LTTE unleashed brutal attacks against the Sinhalese government and terrorized the general population with indiscriminate violence. In 1990, the LTTE consolidated their power in their territory on the northern part of the island by wiping out any opposition among the Tamil community and attacking the Sri Lankan Muslim community, consequently routing the entire Muslim population from the North.[15] This strategy turned the Sri Lankan Moors (9 percent of the population) against the LTTE and the Tamils. Until 2002, Sri Lankan government forces could not ensure protection of 85 percent of the overall population. The tide gradually turned, however, and government forces consolidated control over the majority of the civilian population.

4. **Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

    No. Tamils effectively controlled the Jaffna Peninsula in the northeast of the country, but the LTTE lacked external sanctuary. In the late 1980s, the Tamils relied on active and passive support from thousands of ethnic Tamils across the Palk Strait in Tamil Nadu, India. After the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, however, Indian sympathy toward the Sri Lankan Tamils diminished. Tamil Nadu no longer served as a base of support for LTTE leadership and guerilla training. The LTTE was confined to the northeastern area of the island nation as a home base from which it could train, plan, and execute attacks.[16]

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

    Yes. The Sri Lankan military was well established, along with a police force, though they were viewed as sectarian forces and often discredited in the eyes of the local population. The Sri Lankan armed forces lacked significant combat experience when the Tamil groups first consolidated, but by 1993 they had gained experience in counterinsurgency operations in urban and rural environments.[17] Sri Lanka also spent most of the years between 1994 and 2004 upgrading its conventional capabilities.

SRI LANKA 1993–2005		
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO→	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO→	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	NO→	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO	
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES	

Outcome

Government victory. In this case, war termination occurred by outright military victory. A series of factors fell into place to make a decisive military victory possible. The defection of Karuna and his Tamil fighters, along with their intelligence network and influence over a segment of the Tamil populations, likely provided the Sri Lankan government the support it needed to ensure success. Likewise, the LTTE made the fatal errors of alienating the Sri Lankan Moors, deciding late in the conflict to operate as a conventional military, abandoning guerilla tactics, and engaging superior government forces in major battles. The change in LTTE strategy enabled decisive military success for the Sri Lankan government. Between 80,000 and 100,000 people were killed in the civil war, though the precise number is often contested, and 300,000 Tamils were interned in overcrowded camps after fleeing war zones. Very little policy change took place after the end of armed hostilities, leading to the underlying social disparities currently present in Sri Lanka. The social and political challenges that precipitated the conflict remain largely unaddressed, with ongoing claims that the Tamil and Muslim minorities face marginalization in society.[18]

This case supports the Five Factors theory, provided that a shift in Tamil allegiance over time enabled the Sri Lankan government to garner support from 85 percent of the population regarding national identity, government legitimacy, and population security. At the beginning of the conflict, the Sinhalese-speaking majority represented 87 percent of the population, while the Tamil-speaking minority represented 29 percent (the data total more than 100 percent because some respondents claimed to speak

both languages).[19] When several Tamil-speaking factions changed allegiance to support the Sinhalese-backed government, including the flight of the Muslim population from LTTE violence, and Karuna's defection with his fighters from the LTTE to support the Sri Lankan armed forces, the Sri Lankan government secured the minimum 85 percent of the population necessary for success. Only after this shift of allegiance was the government able to defeat the insurgency and end armed violence.

Endnotes

1. Christopher Paul et al., "Sri Lanka, 1976–2009: Case Outcome: COIN Win," in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 427, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.49.

2. Sumit Kumar Ganguly, "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War," *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 80, 80, doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00475.

3. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 434.

4. Ganguly, "Civil War," 83.

5. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 435, 437.

6. Ganguly, "Civil War," 83.

7. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 436, 438.

8. Ganguly, "Civil War," 83.

9. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 437, 438.

10. "Sri Lanka: People and Society," *World Factbook* (Washington, DC: CIA, continuously updated), last updated May 28, 2024, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sri-lanka/#people-and-society.

11. Ahilan Kadirgamar, "Polarization, Civil War, and Persistent Majoritarianism in Sri Lanka," in *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 54, 58.

12. "People and Society."

13. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 426.

14. "People and Society."

15. Kadirgamar, "Polarization," 58.

16. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 426.

17. Paul et al., "Sri Lanka," 429, 430.

18. Ganguly, "Civil War," 78, 79, 85, 86.

19. "People and Society."

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