

## **Anti-Tamil Riots and the Political Crisis in Sri Lanka**

### **A Report by the Social Studies Circle of the Sri Lankan Worker-Peasant Institute**

"Have a taste of Paradise" says the advertising blurb of Air Lanka, the national airline. But on July 24, 1983, the island paradise for tourists turned into a veritable hell for its Tamil-speaking inhabitants, with fire and smoke engulfing the capital city of Colombo. Within days, rioting spread throughout Sri Lanka in a wave of assaults against the Tamils in almost all the towns and plantation areas. For nearly a week, mob rule prevailed and lynching was the order of the day.

Sri Lanka's population comprises four main communities: the Sinhalese (74%), Lanka Tamils (12.6%), Tamils of recent Indian origin (5.6%), and Muslims (7.1%). The Sinhalese and Lanka Tamils have occupied the island for more than two thousand years, whereas the Tamils of Indian origin were brought there in the nineteenth century, mainly as indentured workers on the British-owned plantations. The Muslims migrated to Sri Lanka from West Asia and India and already formed an ethno-religious community in pre-colonial times.

The Lanka Tamils, most of whom live in the northern region, have experienced discrimination for several decades and have suffered active repression during the last four years. In the national elections of 1977 which brought the J.R. Jayawardena government to power, they voted overwhelmingly for the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). The TULF, an alliance of all the parliamentary parties of the north, concluded that the Tamil national question could not be resolved within a unitary state and therefore demanded a separate Tamil state called Eelam. The TULF envisaged the path to Eelam as peaceful and non-violent. Its inability to achieve its goal led to the formation of a Tamil youth movement whose members armed themselves for the struggle to attain a separate Tamil state.

The Jayawardena government failed to examine the root causes of the Tamil national question and to propose a political solution. Instead, confronted with increasing militancy on the part of northern youth, it stepped up armed repression against the northern people as a whole. When the police failed to contain the unrest the government sent armed forces to the north in late 1979, boasting that it would wipe out terrorism within three months.

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against which the civilians reacted with absolute non-cooperation. In this context the militant youth groups, which had already established links with the mass of the people, were able to operate with ease. Increasingly, they attacked police stations, army units, government establishments, and those northern politicians who had allied themselves with the United National Party (UNP) of Jayawardena. The army was thus confronted with an effective but vanishing enemy which melted into the population after each armed attack. When it found itself incapable of effective counteraction or of capturing any sizeable number of militants, the army turned on innocent civilians. The result was a series of gruesome atrocities against the northern people which further alienated the Tamils from the Colombo regime.

On July 23rd, 1983, in the midst of this repression, a Tamil armed group attacked an army patrol in the Jaffna peninsula, killing thirteen soldiers. Furious, but powerless to punish those responsible, the army indulged in indiscriminate assaults, slaughtering more than seventy civilians.

Rioting broke out in Colombo immediately after the funeral that the government organized for the thirteen soldiers. Part of the mainly Sinhalese crowd attending the funeral broke into gangs and went on a rampage in the city. Sinhalese mobs in other towns followed suit, engulfing most of the country in an orgy of riots. Between the 24th and 31st of July, murder, assault, arson and looting occurred on a scale unprecedented in Sri Lanka. The government's estimate of the carnage is totally untrustworthy; reports reaching us indicate at least 1500 murders and 150,000 rendered homeless.

During the anti-Tamil riots of 1958, which were minor compared with the recent offensive, the left-wing political forces which at that time led the organized sections of the working class were able to set limits to the destruction. Unfortunately, the Left today no longer enjoys leadership among either workers or peasants. During the sixties and seventies, the main left-wing parties compromised themselves by practicing coalition politics with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a bourgeois party which gave expression to Sinhala chauvinism. In tailing the SLFP, the Left abandoned or weakened its positions on both class and national issues. Thus the Communist Party, the first to

advocate a federal solution to the national question in 1946, later abandoned that position. Similarly, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which advocated parity between the Sinhalese and Tamil languages in the fifties, later switched to adopt the SLFP's "Sinhalese Only" policy. These trends alienated the Tamils from the main left-wing parties, leaving them almost wholly Sinhalese in composition.

The period from 1956 to 1977 saw a remarkable expansion of the public sector of the economy, accompanied by an increase of urban workers employed in state and semi-state enterprises. The same period, however, saw a decline in the political strength of the working class. Coalition politics meant that the leftist leaders underplayed class struggle in favor of "national unity against imperialism." Given Sinhalese ethnic dominance, this tended increasingly to imply Sinhalese unity against all others. In its failure to promote class struggle, the Left failed to organize the new public sector workers and even lost support among its traditional followers. The new public sector workers, moreover, came mainly from rich and middle peasant families with enough local political clout to obtain these jobs. Thus arose huge trade unions attached to the ruling party of the day. When the SLFP was in power, the trade unions under its control had the largest membership in the public sector. These unions virtually collapsed when the UNP was returned, their members quickly switching to the UNP unions. It was as if the workers were outsmarting their former leftist leaders. "You had a coalition with only one bourgeois party," they might have said, "but here are we, card-carrying members of the ruling party's unions, whatever that party may be."

The co-optation of workers took place on plantations too. The main left-wing parties had formerly had substantial followings among plantation workers of Indian Tamil origin. When these workers were disenfranchised in 1949, they lost much of their appeal for the left-wing parties, which were becoming increasingly involved in parliamentarism. In turn, the plantation workers turned away from the Left and joined government unions. Today, the two most powerful plantation unions are headed respectively by cabinet ministers S. Thondaman and Gamini Dissanayake. Thus, only a small minority among the working class still follows the lead of the Left.

Within the government-organized unions, collective actions by workers largely ceased. The officers in each union tried to ingratiate themselves with the government for the sake of promotions, bonuses and other perquisites. In line with their class collaboration, the government unions fed their members heavy doses of bourgeois ideology, which was not unwelcome to workers of peasant-owner background. Sinhalese chauvinism and racism are integral components of this ideology in Sri Lanka, being among the most effective means of bourgeois domination over the Sinhalese working people.

Sinhalese chauvinism has deep historical, social and psychological roots. Although the ethnic majority in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese have historically felt inferior as a small minority in the pan-Indian context. In medieval times, the various kingdoms of southern India competed for dominance. The Sinhalese kingdoms of Sri Lanka were frequently encroached upon by these kingdoms or drawn into their dynastic disputes in ways that reinforced the

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Sinhalese ethnic identity. The first modern prophet of Sinhalese chauvinism was Anagarika Dharmapala, the son of a merchant capitalist, who emerged as a religious performer in the early decades of the twentieth century. Dharmapala gave a religious and salvationist bent to Sinhalese nationalism. Through slogans such as "Buddhism will live only while the Sinhalese endure," he elevated the Sinhalese to the level of a chosen people. Sinhalese merchants were especially attracted to this religious chauvinism, for they were trying to expand in opposition to the Indian and other non-Ceylonese groups which at the time dominated the island's trade and moneylending.

In 1948, independence was granted to Ceylon, rather than won through nationalist struggle. Partly through the expansion of the state-controlled banking sector, Sinhalese merchants increased in numbers and largely supplanted the South Indian Chettiar traders who had preceded them. Some areas of commerce such as the lucrative import-export and wholesale trades remained, however, in the hands of "Un-Sinhalese elements," as they were termed by Cyril Mathew, the Minister of Industries. Sinhalese merchants became the most vocal and articulate exponents of Sinhalese chauvinism, exercising ideological hegemony over most of the Sinhala people.

Politicians, Buddhist monks, and other community leaders reinforced the Sinhalese minority complex with such slogans as "The Sinhalese have no country but Sri Lanka." Sinhalese intolerance and insecurity, manifested in aggression against other communities, appear to be enhanced by the patriarchal and authoritarian tendencies in the family and kinship systems. Sexual repression (not a survival from traditional Sinhalese culture, but a late Victorian feature promulgated by puritanical ideologues such as Anagarika Dharmapala) contributes to insecurity and frustration. It was no accident that teenagers formed a majority in the mobs that went on the 1983 rampage.

Whereas previous Sri Lankan governments had used conventional police and armed forces to crush working class protest and opposition in general, the Jayawardena regime has been the first to make systematic use of goon squads. Such squads first went on the rampage immediately after the 1977 elections, setting fire to the houses of opposition activists and beating up the supporters of opposition parties. Thereafter, goon squads beat up workers during the general strike of 1980, killing one worker. They have since been used to smash student protests, break up meetings and beat dissenting intellectuals who spoke at them, and terrorize judges brave enough to pronounce independent judgments. The ethnic riots of 1983 were started and

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Immediately after the riots, the Minister of State announced in a speech that these were not merely spontaneous riots. He spoke of an organized attempt and a sinister hand, and went on to blame the Left and an unnamed foreign power, thus preparing the ground for the proscription of the left-wing parties. Later, President Jayawardena spoke of a plot to undermine the regime, although he did not mention the left-wing parties, referring only to "certain political forces."

There is no doubt that the riots were planned. Jayawardena is correct that local thugs were appointed by "certain political forces" to cause havoc. These forces, however, are within the cabinet, not the Left. For some time, certain members of the cabinet have patronized Sinhalese extremist organizations led by backward members of the Buddhist clergy. At the height of the riots, the President was obliged to grant an interview to Elle Gunawansa, a young Buddhist monk who leads one such group, and offer him assurances. The monk met the President in the company of a senior cabinet minister who appeared to endorse the views of the extremist group. It was precisely such groups that were responsible for appointing the local goon squads that led the rioters.

In Kandy, for example, the government's list of prime suspects consisted mainly of left-wing leaders and cadres who had nothing to do with the disturbances. There appeared, however, three names which everyone in Kandy recognized as those of UNP goon squad leaders having close personal ties with senior ministers. These persons, who led the riots in Kandy, were shortly released, while the leftists who took no part in the riots continued to languish in jail. In other towns, including Colombo, observers identified well-known UNP thugs who were actively leading the mob. "Sinister forces" had indeed appointed "local thugs" to cause the disturbances.

From July 23 to 28 legitimate authority in the country collapsed. The regime, and Jayawardena in particular, was responsible for this. If in normal times even Supreme Court judges can be subjected to terror by goons of the ruling party, one can imagine what is likely to happen during an ethnic riot. In his attempts to quell earlier dissent with the use of goon squads, Jayawardena released a genie he could not control.

With the general breakdown of authority, the army failed in its legitimate tasks. Sinhalese soldiers, blinded by racist ideology, helped and occasionally led the rioters. The government belatedly introduced a curfew but was unable to enforce it because the army was reluctant to disperse the

mob.

After the riots the Jayawardena government announced that it was convening an all-out party conference to discuss ways to wipe out terrorism. When the parties on the Left replied that they were not interested in discussing wiping out terrorism without a solution to the Tamil national problem, Jayawardena promised to widen the scope of the conference and revise its agenda. But when none of the opposition parties including the TULF took part in the conference, he allowed the "sinister forces" to revert to repression.

In addition to generalized repression against the Tamils, the "sinister forces" had as a special objective the attack on and financial ruin of rich Tamil businessmen. The Sinhalese right wing had long suspected these business groups of financial support to the northern militants, and wanted to end any danger of such support. Yet given their class interests, many Tamil businessmen are UNP loyalists. Chauvinist attacks on the Tamil business community have thus actually weakened the UNP base.

In this connection, we should note that after the anti-Tamil riots of 1948, there was a period of relative calm in ethnic relations until 1977. It is since 1977, when Jayawardena's UNP came to power, that there has been almost incessant ethnic violence, including the anti-Tamil riots of August 1977 and July 1981 and the smaller riots against Tamils in Kurunegala and Muslims in Galle toward the end of 1982. These riots may be related to the government's "open" economic policy, which has substantially reduced state control over trade and commerce. In the previous period of import-substitution, when commerce depended on permits and quotas granted as political patronage by the government, the Sinhalese merchants who were close to the government obtained more perquisites. By abolishing permits and quotas, the "open economic policy" did away with the state-sponsored patronage they had enjoyed. The Sinhalese merchant stratum believes that the state has been treating merchants equally regardless of ethnicity. It is anxious for this state of affairs to end and for the state to foster and aid it actively.

The ethnic riots of 1983 were led and organized by a faction in the UNP regime with the intention of weakening the fight for a separate state in northern Sri Lanka. Instead, they pushed the uncommitted among the Tamil people towards favoring such a state. The collective hysteria to which the Sinhalese masses have succumbed is likely to bring them an unhappy future. Capitalizing on this chauvinistic hysteria, the Jayawardena government will be able to take further measures to fulfill the IMF and World Bank demands, namely to cut down the existing, paltry welfare facilities, reduce the real wages of workers, and whittle away the subsidies and welfare that were earlier conferred on the peasants. In the present context of chauvinist hysteria, class struggle is likely to wane temporarily. This may permit the Jayawardena government itself to be replaced by an army regime or a military-civilian junta, which will put forward a populist-fascist ideology of Sinhalese jingoism, but will serve the same ruling class by perpetuating the dependent, underdeveloped capitalist system. Over time, the contradictions inherent in this process will build up and at last explode, leading to the collapse of the capitalist structure together with its repulsive ruling class. ★