POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA: THE JULY 1983 RIOTS

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Introduction

Many varieties of violence are usually lumped together under the single term 'ethnic riots', also referred to in both scholarly and popular writings in Sri Lanka and India as 'communal riots'. This term is understood to denote a conflict between two or more groups of people with different ethnic identities who have an equal or near equal chance of inflicting violence on each other. In other words, It is a 'free for all'; However, not all violence related to the ethnic issue can be categorized this way.

Gunasinghe (1987) has identified the following types of ethnic violence in the context of Sri Lanka: (a) violent ethnic conflict; (b) ethnic riot; (c) pogrom; (d) state violence against an ethnic group; (d) guerilla violence against an ethnic group; (e) war between state forces and guerrillas.

According to this classification, only the first type approximates to what has traditionally been termed a 'communal riot'. The ethnic riot of the second type differs from the first in that it is violence inflicted by **one group** (usually the majority) on the other with no even exchange of violence. Most ethnic violence in South Asia seems to be of this type. A pogrom differs from these because of the organised nature of violence; it is not a spontaneous outburst of irrational passion but an organized form of violence by one group against another with some involvement of the state or parts of the state apparatus.

However, actual events are in many instances a mixture of these types. In fact, the larger the scale of the event, the more likely it is. Even in these instances, however, it might be possible to identify the dominant characteristic of the event, which is important for discerning the relationship between the event and other processes in society.

In this article, I focus on one particular event, which is more easily characterised as a pogrom rather than a riot. Although there were many spontaneous and unorganized aspects of the violence in July 1983, two facts stand out: the first is the organized nature of the riots and the second the distribution of victims — they belonged primarily to Tamil minority groups and were not equally distributed among both contending groups. Thus the July 1983 events in Sri Lanka are closer in character to an anti-Tamil pogrom rather than to a riot.

Ethnic Riot as 'Event' or 'Process'

The initial reaction of articulate public opinion to ethnic riots is one of revulsion. Although the strength and character of the reaction can vary in different places and circumstances, most organizations and individuals active in the public domain react to ethnic riots with outright condemnation. Very often, the liberal intellectual community is at the forefront of this reaction.

Along with this initial reaction is the belief that ethnic riots represent an 'event' which is not 'normal' in civilised society. The violence perpetrated at the time of an ethnic riot can be horrendous and indiscriminate: it can include hacking people to death, or burning them alive; 'retaliation' and 'punishment' meted out to members of other communities may include violence against children, old people and women. This creates a moral problem for observers. There is a feeling of disbelief and horror; the evil seems central, yet liberal opinion tries to hold onto the idea of goodness of human nature by defining such events as 'aberrations' and by seeking for 'culprits' who can be held responsible for perpetrating this horrendous violence. A strongly moralistic approach may therefore distort our analysis of such events.

In Sri Lanka, as in other parts of South Asia, the recurrence of communal riots is seen as a manifestation of communalism, reflecting the 'irrational' passions of backward sections of society. Thus the liberal, modernist tradition uses the opposition of reason and passion to distinguish between the progressive course of history within which the process of nation building and development take place, and the occasional regressions reflected in isolated outbursts of the passions of 'communal-minded' and 'backward' people. Such aberrations are to be condemned and the culprits punished so as to allow the normal process of nation-building and development to proceed. The point is that, within this approach, ethnic riots are isolated events, discontinuous in time, and reflective of an out-dated, false consciousness.

Opposed to this view is the suggestion that we look at ethnic riots in relation to changes in the society in which

they occur, to consider whether they are a manifestation, in an acute form, of the very structures that characterize normal society. In other words, by refusing to treat riots as aberrations, we may be able to understand the structure of a society following a particular path of development.

Development Policies and the Ethnic Issue

Before we come to the relationship between present tendencies in the economy and the ethnic issue, it is necessary to understand this link as it was constituted before 1977. We look at the policies before and after 1977 as two phases within a capitalist framework. In contrast to what is happening now, the previous phase can be characterized as one when state-regulated inward-looking policies dominated with the state as the main engine of economic growth. Protected markets, price controls, restrictions in foreign-exchange movements, and quotas in production were the hallmarks of this period. It implied a greater dependence on state regulation and state involvement in economic development as well as greater protection of the economy from external factors. It is also important to note that state intervention was legitimized with the social-justice argument that it was a means of redressing injustices; some characterized this state ownership/management of the economy within a capitalist framework as 'Socialism'. It is my contention that the interventionist role played by the state had an ethnic dimension.

The fundamental political problem in the ethnic issue is the fact that the majority Sinhala community enjoys state power in Sri Lanka. Thus the state that emerged in post-independent Sri Lanka was heavily biased in favor of Sinhala interests. The intervention of the state in the economy and in other spheres of society carries with it the interests of the majority community.

In the Sri Lankan context the expanded role of the state introduced three mechanisms that could potentially go against the interests of minority ethnic groups:

(a) taking over areas of economic activity in which the minorities had been involved; state sector monopolies could mean a continuous shutting-off of the minorities from such areas of activity.

(b) expansion of state regulation; this meant a system of quotas, permits and licenses in respect of the private sector. Normally, political patronage and the influence of the state bureaucracy play a significant role in granting licenses and permits and the ethnic factor could play an important role in this process.

(c) with the expansion of the state in the economy, it becomes the major avenue of employment. Thus

political patronage becomes critical; since the major parties that have been sharing political power in Sri Lanka are largely backed by the Sinhalese, it is they who stand to benefit from political patronage. Therefore, if, in a context where a system of political patronage operates, an economic policy emphasizes the state as the prime agent, the minorities are affected.

Some writers, such as Shastri (1983) have used Kalecki's model of 'intermediate regimes' to explain the political economy of states dominated by such policies. Intermediate regimes have a state with a multi-class character. In this class coalition, the middle level land-owning and petty bourgeois sections play a key role; the petty-bourgeois will also include sections of the trading class, those employed in minor positions in government, and the vernacular intelligentsia. Their role is crucial in intermediate regimes and they are in the best position to benefit from these policies.

While Kalecki's theory of intermediate regimes throws light upon the class forces behind state-dominated populist development policies, it has to be supplemented, in contexts like Sri Lanka, with the inclusion of the ethnic factor, which clearly plays a role in the processes of state power.

Emergence of the Sinhala State and the Ethnic Issue

As Sri Lanka moved towards independence, the multi-ethnic composition of the population became a central issue in defining state structures. Although in the late twenties some political leaders and representatives of certain ethnic groups had suggested a federal constitution, what eventually came into being at independence was a constitution which sought to safeguard the rights of minorities through checks at the centre: a distribution of seats in parliament to ensure a minority presence, multi-member constituencies where there were pockets of minorities, a second chamber into which minority representatives could be appointed, and clauses to safeguard minority rights. Subsequent political history has shown the ineffectiveness of such safeguards at the centre.

They proved ineffective in the face of the emergence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as a dominant political force bringing pressure on the state through the electoral process. The elections in 1956, in which a government with a hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist ideology came to power, was a turning point in this process. Although the influence of this ideology was seen immediately after independence, when a section of a minority was disfranchised, it was after 1956 that Sinhala Buddhist nationalism became the dominant ideology of the ruling class. It is from this point onwards that a class block similar to

that of Kelecki's intermediate regime came to dominate state power. One result was the institution of state dominated populist development policies within a capitalist framework; the other was the systematic dismantling of constitutional safeguards for minorities.

This process reveals the weaknesses of a bourgeois-democratic system in a multi ethnic society. Due to numerical strength, the Sinhalese Buddhists came to occupy a dominant position in the political structure; minorities began to feel an inability to exercise power within the system because of a numerical weakness. Thus ethnic issues came to dominate the electoral process. Even the bourgeoisie, whose objective interests within an international capitalist system should have been different, began to play ethnic politics in order to stay in power. Thus all the major parties identify themselves with a Sinhala Buddhist ideology. This, however, does not imply that ethnicity in politics was only a manipulation of the ruling classes, for ethnic consciousness has a real basis within the popular consciousness of all ethnic groups. Both rulers and the ruled form parts of a society dominated by ethnic consciousness.

The response to the emergence of a dominant Sinhala Buddhist ideology came from the Sri Lanka Tamils who form the numerically biggest minority. Tamil political leadership had agreed to safeguards at the centre at independence, although these were much less than demanded; their demands now changed to the achievement of regional autonomy. This took form in the mid-fifties of a demand for a federal system which by the early seventies had escalated to a demand for a separate state. The escalation of these demands also saw the emergence of a new political leadership within Tamils - of a petty bourgeois character, less westernized and with a regional base in the northern province, where there is a concentration of the Tamil population; there was also a change in the form of the political struggle with armed struggle becoming dominant. In some ways they are a mirror image of the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie which spearheaded the ethnic nationalism of the south.

The ethnic contradiction was thus aggravated; in the elections of 1977, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) —the organization that had first spearheaded the demand for a separate state— won the elections in the north and to a lesser extent in the East, also becoming the major opposition party. For the first time in Sri Lankan history, parliament reflected the ethnic polarisation in the country. While the United National Party (UNP) with a five-sixths majority obtained largely from a Sinhalese majority, was on the government side, the TULF was leading the opposition after winning the Tamil vote on a separate state demand.

The Post-1977 Development Experience of Sri Lanka

In the present context of capitalist growth, Sri Lanka's development policies are internationally determined. This determination emerges not only because of the greater intervention of bodies like the IMF and the World Bank, but also because international capitalism as an objective historical force determines these policies; they also satisfy the needs of the emerging national bourgeoisie. Specifically in the case of Sri Lanka, international bodies began to advise on economic affairs in 1952; this developed, in 1965, to the establishment of the 'Aid Ceylon Club', since when international influence has grown to a very significant degree. (Lakshman 1987). This is parallelled by greater penetration of the international capitalist system into all forms of production. Today, even the cultivation process of a small farmer in a remote village area of Sri Lanka is touched by forces that can be traced to an international system.

These policies have two aspects, namely structural change and stabilization. The structural policies recommended are liberalization of trade and financial dealings with the world, the development of financial institutions and money markets, and the reduction of state intervention; balanced budgeting and maintaining a stable growth in money supply are recommended for stabilization. These recommendations are based on well known tenets of free-market theories that emphasize market forces, comparative advantages, reliance on private capital (local and foreign), balanced budgets (cutting down government expenditure and welfare) and control of money supply as the principal means of economic growth.

Imperatives of the Liberalized Economy in Ethnic Relations

The implications of these policies for ethnic relations in Sri are important in two aspects:

(a) Outward policies make political stability an important pre-requisite. Since the ethnic issue was the main destabilizer, it was necessary to manage it.

(b) The relatively little importance attached to the state sector had the potential of reducing the importance of ethnically-biased structures that the earlier state interventionist policies had brought into prominence. In class terms this meant overcoming the influence of petty-bourgeois sections.

A government that had in mind a strategy of development based on greater integration with international capitalism could not afford to ignore the contradictions arising

out of ethnic relations. Attracting foreign investment is a cornerstone of these policies, and for foreign investors, political stability is a *sina qua non*. Thus, liberalized economic policies have built-in pressures for political stability.

The strategy of the UNP in facing this issue was to try and arrange an accommodation with representatives of the Tamil bourgeoisie and the traditional Tamil leadership. This was not a new experience for the UNP, whose previous period in power was in coalition with the leading Tamil political party — the Federal Party. The UNP itself had Tamil members as well as Tamil speaking Muslim members from the eastern province — a province dominated by the minorities. The UNP was also able to get the participation of the leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) which is virtually the sole representative body of the Indian Tamil community. As revealed by the leader of the CWC in parliament, the UNP held discussions prior to the elections with representatives of the Tamil minority; the result was the acceptance by the UNP, in its manifesto, that several grievances of the Tamil people were legitimate and would be resolved through an all-party conference. The leader of the CWC, Mr.Thondaman, joining the government and becoming a minister, was another by product of this process; this was useful to prevent the ethnic issue spreading to the estate areas where the bulk of the workforce is Indian Tamil. Compared to the SLFP-led government which had almost totally ignored the Tamil minority, the UNP was more aware of the issue, mainly because of the self-interest of capitalism which needed political stability.

One of the first measures of the new government was the removal of standardization in university admission policies. Although replaced by a different formula that had some disadvantages vis-a-vis Tamil students, the removal of standardization was significant in appeasing Tamil grievances.

The new constitution enacted in 1978 gave Tamil the status of a national language. Perhaps the high point of this accommodation process was the enactment of the District Development Council Bill (DDC) in order to give a certain measure of autonomy to the districts. It must also be remembered that it was the dissenting report of the only Tamil member of the DDC commission that was taken as the basis for the District Development Scheme.

Thus the 'rational capitalist' element of the UNP and their foreign collaborators had a self-interest in overcoming the contradictions of ethnicity. However, the UNP also had, within itself, populist as well as Sinhalese nationalist elements. Being a creature of the electoral process and dependent on it for power, the UNP also had to adapt to the fact that Sinhala nationalism and ethnic chauvinism were the dominant prevailing ideologies among the elec-

torate. Thus, opposition to accommodative policies with the Tamil minority was also found within the governing party itself. From the very inception of this government one can see an interaction between these two opposing tendencies.

The attempt at accommodation was also nullified by the growth of Tamil militancy. The expressions of Sinhala nationalism in its extreme forms, both within the government and outside, could be kept in check by the ruling sections by the use of state power; there was nothing to check the growth of Tamil militancy. The accommodative attitude of the government was directed towards the moderate Tamil leadership while militancy was met by harsh repression. The repressive action of a highly Sinhalized army spilled over to the Tamil civilian population, which in turn created a social basis for Tamil militancy..

In short, the liberalized economic policies had to be implemented in a society that was ethnically polarized, with the majority community enjoying state power. Since economic liberalization had the potential to dismantle the structures that gave special benefits to the community enjoying state power, they were bound to evoke a reaction, sometimes violent, among Sinhala extremists.

The Anti-Tamil Pogrom of July 1983

There have been several incidents of large-scale ethnic violence in Sri Lanka's post-independent history; in 1958, August 1977, August 1981, and July 1983. In order to understand these events it is necessary to place them in the context of large scale socio-political processes. Therefore, the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 has to be analyzed in the context of the processes generated by the development policies in the post-1977 period.

Most of these large-scale events since 1977 have occurred against a backdrop of political moves which were attempts to begin a process of dialogue and discussion. What preceded the August 1977 riots were the pre-election discussions and dialogue between the UNP, representatives of the Tamil bourgeoisie, and the traditional leadership. The post-election incidents of violence in July 1977, during which members of the opposition were attacked, became transformed into anti-Tamil riots. The August 1981 attack on Tamils occurred within a context of the first district Development Council Elections, which was a measure agreed upon as an interim solution by the moderate Tamil leadership. However, the brunt of the attack in these riots was borne by the Indian Tamil community.

The July 1983 riots coincided with an attempt at calling an all-party conference to settle the ethnic issue. Though originally called only to discuss the so-called 'terrorist'

problem, its scope was expanded to include all aspects of the issue. This consultation was to be held on 27 July. The July 1983 events started on 23/24 July.

As mentiomed earlier, nationalist elements could be found both within the government and outside, although those in positions of power have greater chance of perpetrating violence and yet escaping the consequences of their actions. Large-scale ethnic pogroms were the organised reaction of Sinhala chauvinism whenever the government tried to reach an accommodation with the moderate Tamil leadership. Such events became more frequent after 1977 because the imperatives of development increased the necessity for accommodation.

The Event

T he incident that provoked the July 1983 violence was the killing of soldiers by Tamil militants. Militants had lured out the army with false information and ambushed them; thirteen soldiers were killed. On the same day, the army had begun certain operations to remove some of the estate Tamil population that had been settled in the predominantly Tamil districts of Mannar, Vavuniya and Trincomalee. These were refugees of the August 1977 and August 1981 riots who were later settled in these lands. The settlement of these people, who were victims of ethnic riots, had been strongly opposed by Sinhala chauvinist elements. A former cabinet minister of the regime in power led this opposition. According to a statement issued by the Ceylon Workers Congress, around 600 people were removed from this area in the early hours of the morning of July and brought to Nuwara Eliya district, where there is a preponderant Indian Tamil population. As we shall see later, the role of the army is an important factor in the anti-Tamil pogroms of Sri Lanka. In the case of the July 1983 outbreak, this seems to have begun from these actions by the army against the Indian Tamil population.

Just after the soldiers were ambushed in Jaffna, the army retaliated against Tamil civilians. During this retaliation, which took place in Tirunaely and Kantharamadu area, a number of people died. The figure is 20 according to official sources, and over 70 according to others. Similar incidents seem to have taken place in the Trincomalee area. In these incidents the navy was involved, but the toll is not known. Some sources state that more than a hundred sailors were involved in these retaliations.

Sunday, 24 July

The news of the ambush reached Colombo by the afternoon of 24 July. This was a Sunday and a crowd, including the relatives of the soldiers, had gathered at the General Cemetery, Colombo, for the burial of the soldiers. The government was to bury the soldiers with full military honours, and even high-level representatives of government were to attend the funeral. But the bodies of the dead soldiers could not be brought to Colombo in time, mainly on account of conditions prevailing in Jaffna, where the government was finding it difficult to control the army that had gone on a rampage against Tamil civilians. Ultimately the bodies were brought to army headquarters and handed over to the relatives; but that was later. By the evening of Sunday a large crowd had gathered at the cemetary expecting the bodies of the soldiers, and some began to become unruly. Police officers who were trying to control the crowd were attacked, and some of the shops and houses at Borella belonging to Tamils were stoned and set on fire; this is the area where the General Cemetery is situated. However, it is also clear that Tamils living in other parts of Colombo , especially in the suburbs, were not aware of what happened at Borella on the previous night. Many left their homes for work on the following morning and children went to school as well. The systematic attack on Tamil property seemed to have begun a little later on Monday. All the Monday morning papers carried the story of ambushing of soldiers, with full banner headlines, despite the press censorship which had been imposed a few days before, on 19 July. It is significant that none of the newspapers reported the retaliation by the soldiers in Jaffna.

Monday, 25 July

At about 10.30 a.m. there began what seemed to be a carefully organized attack on Tamil property. By the time the government imposed a curfew at 2.00 p.m., hundreds of buildings and factories had been set ablaze. Along with the organized elements, the lumpen proletariat of the city joined the fray. Curfew was on from 2.00 p.m. on Monday until 5.00 a.m. on Wednesday. On Monday night, according to official sources, about 300 to 500 prisoners at the Welikada jail broke out of their cells, overpowered the guards and beat and stabbed 35 Tamil detainees to death with spikes, clubs and iron-rods. The Welikade Prison, Colombo's maximum-security prison, held 800 convicts and 73 extremist suspects detained under emergency regulations.

Tuesday, 26 July

The looting and arson which started on Monday continued on Tuesday despite the curfew.

Wednesday, 27 July

At 5.00 a.m. curfew was lifted to enable people to shop. Food was scarce in the city as many Tamil wholesale and retail shops had been burnt. Many Tamils were streaming into hastily opened camps. On Wednesday violence spread to other parts of the island and curfew was imposed at 4.00 p.m. Tamil detainees were killed at

Welikade Prison, in the same manner as on Monday night. The victims included Dr. S. Rajasunderam, secretary of the Gandhian Movement, a social service organization.

Thursday, 28 July

There was a lull on Thursday; Colombo was quiet. President Jayewardene spoke publicly for the first time in brief on radio and television in both Sinhala and English. He neither condemned the rioters nor offered consolation to the victims. He laid the blame for the mayhem on the Tamils for demanding a separate state; he further announced that a constitutional amendment banning separatism would be put into effect. But the speech did not seem to placate the Sinhalese as, on the next day, there was fear and panic among the Sinhalese over the rumour that the Liberation Tigers were in Colombo.

Friday, 29 July

Rumour spread in Colombo that the Liberation Tigers were invading the city to exact revenge. Mobs beat to death Tamils who strayed from the security of the refugee camps or their homes. About 100 persons were reported killed. On this day the security forces took serious measures against looters, shooting or arresting some. This was the last wave of violence in Colombo. It was also the day on which Indian Foreign Minister, Narasimha Rao, arrived in Colombo with a message from Mrs. Gandhi.

The toll of the riots was immense. According to official sources, the number of dead was around 400. But there were other estimates. These varied — more than 500; around 1000; more than 2000; and even a figure as high as 4000. According to official sources, around 100,000 were rendered homeless. But according to others, this was the figure only for Colombo. Outside Colombo there were 175,000 refugees. An estimate of the damage to trade and business establishments was done by a government task force. It covered 116 industrial establishments that had been damaged within a 30-mile radius of Colombo. In addition it estimated that 492 trading establishments had been damaged at Pettah, which is a wholesale and retail trade area in Colombo.

The political response of the government to the riots began to emerge during the course of the events. It was contradictory and showed the confused position of the government on the issues. On the one hand the government said and did a lot to appease the sentiments of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. This began with the head of state saying that the riot was a legiti-mate expression of anger by the Sinhala Buddhist majority and culminated in legislation which made espousing the cause of separatism illegal; it resulted in the removal from parliament of legitimate representatives of the Tamil People.

The second response of the government was an attempt to find scapegoats from the Left as elements behind the riots. Several theories of conspiracy were floated. One talked of an attempt to promote conflicts between different ethnic groups of the country, starting from Sinhala and Tamil. This was expected to lead to general destabilization. This same speculation extended to a coup theory in which sections of the army were also supposed to be involved. Therefore, for the government, on the one hand the riot was a legitimate expression of Sinhalese anger, and on the other hand was an attempt to overthrow the government: a classic contradictory response reflecting a crisis.

Although the July 1983 riots ended a week after it began, a similar pattern of events continued within the context of intensifying ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Significantly, the army was involved in several such incidents after July 1983, showing how institutions of the state themselves became the perpetrators of violence and lawlessness.

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