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Radicalization in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Though the present context of radicalization is being discussed primarily in the religious perspective, it has its own explanations in different perceptions. Sri Lanka is a classic example to make this argument. With a prolonged ethnic conflict Sri Lanka has experienced, and continues to experience, religious and political radicalization in all its manifestations since the country's independence.

The issue of radicalization in Sri Lanka goes back over a millennium and a half to the initial days of the ethnic conflict. The Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups have engaged in political rivalry probably for over fifteen centuries.

Even though both ethnic communities originally derived from neighbouring India, those originating from northern and southern India locked themselves in a prolonged conflict on the issue of autonomy – mainly with regard to the northern region of the country, with the eastern region also joining in later. After continuous neglect by successive governments of various political issues of ethnic minority Tamils in the north and east of the country, the struggle has degenerated into terrorism.

Largely dominated by Sinhala Buddhists, Sri Lanka is home to four major ethnic communities: Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslimsⁱ and Burghers of Dutch descent. Radicalization, whether as an effect of the protracted conflict or not, could be seen on the political, religious and ethnic fronts with its symptoms visible in every socio-political sphere.

Political Radicalization

Ethnicity, not religion, is the defining characteristic of radicalization in Sri Lanka. The issues facing ethnic minority Tamils have been on the political platform since the island nation's independence from British rule in February 1948, but have not been addressed. These issues remained mere electioneering tools for the major political forces in the south while peaceful Tamil agitations were generally met with riots or violence. Thus, the moderate Tamil political leadership found itself being isolated by the Tamil youth by the early 1980s, and later being systematically eliminated.

The radical Tamil movement emerged during the early '70s with a small group of youth with locally made weapons engaged in random killings, robberies and destructive activities. They held radical political views, in stark contrast to the Tamil polity of the day, which was aligned to non-violent Gandhian-style campaigns. The militant youth argued that the peaceful Tamil political movements had not brought any tangible results for their issues, rather ended up as mere political pledges on election platforms. This argument and the prevailing political situation of the country attracted many youth to resort to militancy for gaining a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern parts.

Fired by radical political ideologies and backed by a gradually growing militant capacity, the number of armed Tamil youth groups gradually grew along with their combat power. Though the initial phase of the militancy inclined towards Marxist ideologies that leaning disappeared at a later stage.

Most significantly, external support towards Tamil militancy fuelled the situation to a greater extent. Radical views of political leaders in both Sri Lanka and India at the time (J.R. Jayewardene and Indira

Gandhi respectively) paved the way for New Delhi to provide logistic, training and other support to Tamil militant organizations in the early '80s.

Emergence of the LTTE

The radicalization of Tamil youth not only rewrote the history of Sri Lanka, it also added a crucial chapter to the global history book of terrorism. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a terrorist organization that has been banned in 32 countries including the United States, UK, India and the European Union eliminated almost all other Tamil militant groups and also the moderate Tamil political leadership in a bid to present itself as the sole representative of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka.ⁱⁱ The three-decade-long conflict has claimed the lives of over 75,000 people.ⁱⁱⁱ

The key significance in the Tiger radicalization is their initiation of the present-day suicide bombing culture. Unlike other radicalized suicide cadres, the Tigers are not driven by religious beliefs or expectations of rewards in the hereafter, but by their total commitment to a political cause. The group could boast of the most dedicated group of suicide cadres compared to any terrorist group in the world.

Identified as Black Tigers, the Tiger suicide cadres operate directly under the command of Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and its intelligence wing chief Pottu Amman, and are the most sophisticated and ruthless unit of the LTTE. Though there seem to be a great deal of eagerness to join the unit, according to LTTE claims, Black Tigers are hand-picked by Prabhakaran. Most of these cadres are from the families of those who have been severely affected by military operations of the government or by other opposition groups. Dhanu -- the garland-carrying woman suicide bomber that killed former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi -- is the prime example. Her family was subjected to severe harassments by the Indian peacekeeping forces in Sri Lanka.

Once assigned to an operation, there have been extremely few cases of defection among the highly motivated, disciplined and covert Black Tiger cadres. Tiger suicide operations have also provided operational examples to other groups including Al Qaeda.^{iv} Black Tigers would provide a classic case study for a comprehensive research on radicalization for suicide terrorism.

Marxist Leftists in the South - JVP

Radicalization of the Sri Lankan youth in the early '70s was not limited to the northern Tamils. The majority southern Sinhalese youth, too, were radicalized by Marxist ideologies and took up arms against the government at the time in an unsuccessful countrywide armed resistance. The Peoples Liberation Front (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, popularly known as the JVP), led by a Marxist ideologist, Rohana Wijeweera, locally identified as a leader in Che Guerra's mould, rebelled against three elected regimes of Sri Lanka over a period of 18 years.^v

Flourishing among the underprivileged and marginalized youth, the JVP managed to establish a strong support base at the grassroots level and in universities. The insurgencies it launched^{vi} faced a ruthless response by the governments of the day. Killings took place in large numbers and dead bodies were a frequent sight even at public places.

The movement highly benefited from the socio-political and economic issues of the country at the time. Rural underprivileged youth were attracted to its radical political ideologies and the party had an

organized structure for radicalizing them through systematic lectures and then arming and training them in guerrilla operations. As Prof. Ralph Buultjens^{vii} explains, measured by the impact it has had on society and the threat it has presented to three elected governments in Sri Lanka, the JVP has been highly effective in its disruptive capacity.^{viii}

However, the captured and killing of its leader Rohana Wijeweera by security forces in November 1989 and subsequent elimination of all its main leaders prompted the movement to carve a political path and adopt new strategies in politics. All except one of the 11-member PVP politburo were killed and its military and operational structure and capacity completely destroyed.

As in the case of any underground military organization, the JVP was also shattered by the loss of its chief and main leadership. The only way it could survive was to rejoin the democratic political mainstream in the country. After opting for the political path, the JVP eventually emerged as the third largest political party in Sri Lanka in successive polls.

The JVP has been described as the Sinhala twin of the LTTE.^{ix} However, its re-entry into mainstream politics could also be viewed as a bold transformation of its ideology and activism at large. Gunaratna in the preface to his book 'Sri Lanka - A Lost Revolution?' writes:

... the post-Wijeweera JVP has today re-merged as the third largest political party in Sri Lanka. It remains one of the few success stories of a highly successful underground movement that radically transformed its character to embrace mainstream democratic politics. The Sri Lankan security forces and intelligence community's success in destroying the JVP core and penultimate leadership permanently crippled its capacity to re-emerge as a military force.

Religious Radicalization in Sri Lanka

Though the protracted conflict in Sri Lanka has generally had an ethnic countenance, religion plays a significant role in all its spheres. The prolonged ethnic strife has added a religious dimension to the conflict - especially with regard to majority Sinhalese who are predominantly Buddhists.

The phenomenon of minority complex of a majority^x could largely be seen among the Sinhala Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka which - in some cases - is justifiable. With the escalation of war in the last two years, the nationalistic sentiments coupled with pro-war campaigns were common in all spheres of the country's social fabric. This situation was further fuelled by some recent comments by senior authorities, proclaiming Sinhala Buddhists' sole 'ownership' of Sri Lanka. Other ethnicities were asked to look for alternatives.

A significant player in the current governing coalition in Sri Lanka is the hard-line Sinhala Buddhist political party Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) - a political grouping predominantly of Buddhist monks. Mobilizing a Sinhala Buddhist hard-line audience that was created by another popular Buddhist monk, Ven Gangodawila Soma Thera,^{xi} the JHU came into power with a considerable number of seats (11) in parliament. It thus became a decisive factor in the ruling coalition, most significantly influencing key policies of the government.

The radical ideology of the JHU led to many controversies within the Sri Lankan polity and also the society at large. A recent comment by a cabinet minister from the JHU against Muslim girls wearing veils in the country's non-Muslim schools sparked a heated debate among the concerned parties.^{xii}

Sri Lanka's constitution guarantees Buddhism the foremost position among all other religions in the country.

Anti-conversion and anti-blasphemy laws have already been enacted in India, Pakistan, and Indonesia.^{xiii} Sri Lanka attempted to follow suit, but the parliament never debated a draft anti-conversion bill tabled in 2004. However, in August 2004, the Supreme Court declared the draft bill, conceived by the JHU, was constitutional. Some argue the decision not only ignores the country's basic law -- which declares that "every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice"^{xiv} --but it also violates the international norms and obligations that Sri Lanka has committed itself to through United Nations protocols and conventions.^{xv} However, the draft did not become a law.

Nevertheless, moderate Buddhists and other religious communities also view forcible or 'unethical' conversions as a social menace. Several hardcore fundamental religious groups conduct 'unethical' conversions of underprivileged and marginalized segments among the rural poor mainly through financial influence. A national commission established by the country's leading Buddhist gathering, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC), conducted comprehensive investigations and held public hearings for over a year and made 121 proposals for the protection and strengthening of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. These proposals are expected to be implemented by Buddhist temples.^{xvi}

'Unethical' conversions have further damaged inter-religious harmony in Sri Lanka, as is the case in many countries in the region, including India. In the past three years, more than 100 churches have been attacked around Sri Lanka, for which hard-line Buddhists have been mainly blamed. In most of these cases, religious influence trumped the implementation of the rule of law. However, more systematic and professional approaches like establishing the ACBC commission has helped control the situation to a great extent.

A grenade attack on a concert featuring Indian movie star Shah Rukh Khan and his Bollywood troupe in Colombo in December 2004 was a significant event with regard to Buddhist radicalism in Sri Lanka. The event coincided with the first death anniversary of Gangodawila Soma Thera, a popular Buddhist monk. Protestors had been demanding the event's postponement, saying it was a day for mourning, not for enjoyment. Military and police were deployed to disperse the agitating crowd. The grenade explosion in the premises during the show killed two people and injured another 18. Buddhist activists were blamed for the attack, but the charge was never proved.

Muslims in Sri Lanka

With Sunnis the majority Muslim population in Sri Lanka, the country has witnessed a relatively low level of religious radicalism among the Islamic believers in the country compared to other countries in the region.

Radicalization of Muslims, especially in the face of LTTE violence against the eastern Muslims, was seen in the late '80s and also in the '90s, but did not endure as a movement. Moreover, with the resumption of

peace talks between the government and the LTTE in 2001, eastern Muslims demanded to be part of the negotiations to decide the future of the Eastern Province. Most of these protests centered around the South Eastern University. This prompted a convention in January 2003 in the southeastern coastal city of Oluwil, which demanded through a declaration self-determination for Muslims in the Eastern Province.

Lack of unity, and political and sectarian issues are common within the Sri Lankan Muslim community. Among four main religious gatherings, Tablig Jamaat is widely seen by non-Muslims as a grouping with radical approach—which has not been an issue since its political passiveness—something that has been continuously denied by the Sri Lankan Muslims. Muslim preachers in Sri Lanka generally promote Islam in a non-violent and non-radical context.

Though precise figures cannot be ascertained, conversion to Islam is increasing in the country. Monitoring of Tamil newspapers^{xvii} reveals the publication of at least 10 paid notices per month announcing conversions of Tamils to Islam. Such conversions predominantly follow inter-ethnic marriages in the east and in the central hills region of the country.

The conversion of a senior Buddhist monk to Islam, not only as a general practitioner, but also as a preacher, shows the trend. Matale Gnanodaya Thera was ordained at the age of 12, educated at leading Buddhist training centers for clergy and spent 33 years as a Buddhist monk preaching Buddhism across the country. He then converted to Islam and now functions as a Muslim preacher in rural Sri Lanka.

He does not attribute his conversion to any individual or group's influence. "I find many parallels between Islam and Buddhism. The basis of both religions is the same. So I opted to convert to Islam which provides more practical aspects of the truth," he says.^{xviii}

The emergence of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress in the late 1980s can also be considered a significant event that transformed radical Muslim political activism into a democratic process. The party that mainly focused on the Eastern Province Muslims during its early days now plays a vital role in the political theatre at the national level. It has emerged as a main political force in Sri Lanka's polity within a considerably short period of operation.

The Eastern Province with all its multi-ethnic features continues to remain one of the most volatile regions in the country. Muslims, one-third of the province's population, continue to be sandwiched between Sinhalese and Tamils who are divided in equal proportion on ethnic lines. A decisive part of the violent conflict in Eastern Province was the major attraction for all the major players, but mainly for the LTTE. The Muslims in the east were subjected to continuous harassment, intimidation and ruthless violence. However, they seldom reacted to that intimidation and violence. Though there have been unconfirmed reports of armed Muslim youth operating in the east in the name of Jihad, but that is mostly ad hoc and lacks an established central command.

However, the responses by the Muslims to the Tamil militant aggression in the Eastern Province have been far below the expected level, displaying a high degree of tolerance. These Muslims continue to repose their faith in the democratic political system amidst severe hardships and challenges.

There have been isolated instances of sudden emergence of fundamental Islamic groups in the eastern Muslim-populated areas. However, these groups have not managed to make a significant impact within

the socio-ethnic system of the region. Nevertheless, the situation remains vulnerable with external interest groups looking for opportunities in the region.

The country has 251 madrassas^{xix}, but according to Muslim leaders, none of them has bred extremism, radicalism or fundamentalism. The government, Muslim philanthropists and well-wishers continue to support these madrassas in various capacities.

Conclusion

Devastated by over three decades of violent conflict, Sri Lanka continues to experience many forms of radicalization in its entire social fabric. As discussed above, such radicalization mainly assumes political and religious forms, with both aspects largely inter-linked.

Levels of radicalization among different religious groups in Sri Lanka vary from those in other countries in the region. Political maturity, fair play, adhering to basic principles of human dignity and mutual respect are the best tools for tackling these forms of radicalism, especially in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Sri Lankan society.

Notes and References:

ⁱ Followers of Islam are being identified as a special ethnic community in Sri Lanka.

ⁱⁱ The LTTE has killed almost all Tamil political / militant leadership whose ideology differed to theirs. Some Tamil political leaders who oppose LTTE's viewpoint continue to operate from the capital Colombo with heavy security provided by the State.

ⁱⁱⁱ The first killing by the LTTE took place in July 1975. The exact number of killings remains unknown. The figure quoted by international media until 2007 was 60,000. The military subsequently claimed killing more than 10,000 Tigers. Officials claim security forces suffered around 5,000 fatalities in the past two years.

^{iv} Several research studies have compared the modus operandi of Al Qaeda and the LTTE in some attacks. The most significant has been by Shanaka Jayasekera of Macquarie University of Sydney on the method of attack on USS Cole by Al Qaeda and LTTE's targeting of Sri Lankan navy ship Abheetha in the country's northern waters.

^v Gunaratna, Rohan, *A Lost Revolution*, IFS; Kandy; 2001, p. iii.

^{vi} The major armed insurrections were launched in 1971 and subsequently in 1988-89. The JVP went underground in 1983 after being declared a banned organization along with two other political parties.

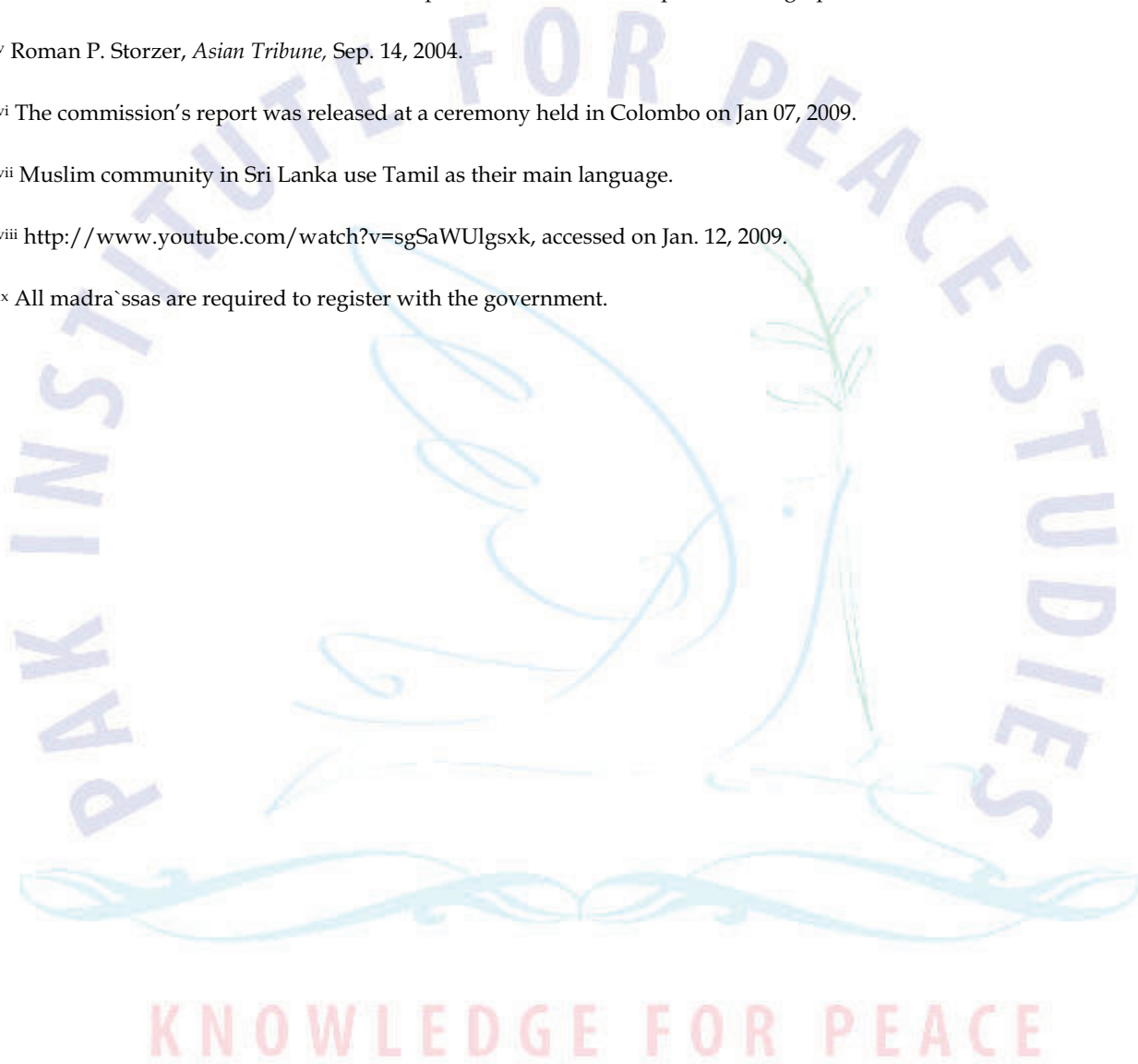
^{vii} Prof. Buultjens is a former senior fellow at the Institute of Fundamental Studies in Sri Lanka, a senior professor at New York University and the New School for Social Research in New York.

^{viii} Gunaratna, Rohan, *A Lost Revolution*, IFS 2001, p vi.

^{ix} Ibid

^x Dixit, J N, *Assignment Colombo*, Vijitha Yapa Publication; Colombo; 2004, p. 13.

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- ^{xi} Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera was an extremely popular Buddhist preacher until his unexpected demise in 2004. He openly admitted his intention of joining active politics by contesting presidential elections. His death paved the way for the JHU to muster the support of his followers.
- ^{xii} Ravaya newspaper, Dec. 21, 2008.
- ^{xiii} <http://www.becketfund.org/>, Jan 12, 2009
- ^{xiv} Constitution of Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Chapter III, Paragraph 10.
- ^{xv} Roman P. Storzer, *Asian Tribune*, Sep. 14, 2004.
- ^{xvi} The commission's report was released at a ceremony held in Colombo on Jan 07, 2009.
- ^{xvii} Muslim community in Sri Lanka use Tamil as their main language.
- ^{xviii} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgSaWUlgsk>, accessed on Jan. 12, 2009.
- ^{xix} All madra`ssas are required to register with the government.



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