# Peace Building in Sri Lanka: Do the Root Causes Matter?

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## Introduction

Literature on peace studies highlights that, rigorous examination of the causes, nature and effect of the prior conflict should be the basis of a post-conflict peace building strategy (Zyl, 2005). It also needs to scrutinize the social, structural and institutional causes of conflict and should be able to clarify not only what happened in individual cases but also, the broader context which enabled the violations to occur. In addition to this, the role that external actors and non-state actors have played in fuelling and sustaining conflict and identifying the root causes of conflict can be accomplished through the diagnostic function. On the above basis more effective and informed recommendations can be made as measures that can be taken to deal with these root causes and reduce the capacity of disruptive actors to reinitiate conflict. The recommendations can be extraordinarily helpful to those who are developing or executing post-conflict peace building strategies.

The most demanding measures are those that expect peace building to address ''root causes'' of conflict. This is the standard implied by the United Nations Security Council (2001) in a Presidential Statement on peace building in February 2001:

> The Security Council recognizes that peace building is aimed at preventing the outbreak, the recurrence or the continuation of armed conflict and therefore encompasses a wide range of political, development, humanitarian and human rights programmes and mechanism. This requires short- and long-term actions tailored to address the particular needs of societies sliding

into conflict or emerging from it. These actions should focus on fostering
sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and inequalities,
transparent and accountable governance, the promotion of democracy,
respect for human rights and the rule of law and the promotion of a culture
of peace and nonviolence (UN Security Council, 2001)[1].

Furthermore, according to Spence (2001) peace building means that, those activities
and processes that focus on the root causes of the conflict, rather than just the effects;
support the rebuilding and rehabilitation of all sectors of the war-torn society;
encourage and support interaction between all sectors of society in order to repair
damaged relations and start the process of restoring dignity and trust; recognize the
specifics of each post conflict situation; encourage and support the participation of
indigenous resources in the design, implementation and sustainment of activities and
processes; and promote processes that will endure after the initial emergency recovery
phase has passed (Spence:2001).

This theory is further supported by Paris (2004) who explains that, only two of
the major UN peace building operations since 1989 to be successes which were
Namibia and Croatia. Cases like the Central American peace processes and
Mozambique although usually included among the success stories of the 1990s are
judged to be mixed outcomes since underlying causes of the wars persisted alongside
the lack of armed conflict.

In addition to this Zyl (2005) points out that "development of a post-conflict
peace building strategy must be based on a rigorous examination of the causes, nature
and effect of the prior conflict." Ultimately, these grievances point to the failure of
states to provide a minimum standard of living for all citizens, which could be
presented as a violation of economic, social and cultural rights.

In order for a post-conflict peace building process to be successful it must
address the underlying causes of conflict. Post-conflict peace building should include

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[1]Available at: http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/index. (Accessed 19th October 2012).

"strategies designed to promote a secure and stable lasting peace in which the basic human needs of the population are met and where violent conflicts do not recur". In support of the above statement according to Burton's human needs theory of conflict resolution it is stated that addressing root causes is fundamental to the resolution of any violent conflict. According to Spence, "the process of peace building calls for new attitudes and practices: ones that are flexible, consultative and collaborative and that operate from a contextual understanding of the root causes of conflict" (2001).

There is a growing body of literature on topics such as theoretical debates on origin and spread of ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka written by several scholars. This type of literature can be used to locate root causes of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka which in turn can be implemented in order to create a successful peace building process. Therefore, an aim of this study will be to explore available literature on the root causes of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict in order to establish an understanding of its origin. This paper will examine the historical background of Sri Lankan politics from colonial era to the contemporary era in order to attain a descriptive understanding of the conflict; this will be accomplished in and through the form of several scholarly theoretical debates. These debates greatly contribute towards deciphering apparently incomprehensible and highly complex philological argument. Thus enabling to use the theoretical debates to identifying the root causes will act as one of the major strategies in building a sustainable peace building process in Sri Lanka. In order to accomplish the above objective in a simplistic manner the text has been categorized as follows.

**1. Limitation of Party Politics under the Colonial Period**

Most of the literature provides that the British Colonial policy in Sri Lanka had been formulated with a tendency towards promoting technocrats who support the government instead of party politics.

Wickramasinghe (1995) states that, the Donoughmore Constitution had been in the exercise of eradicating all forms of parochialism from politics by getting rid of

ethnic representation, restraining the role of party politics and promoting a form of government ideal for technocrats rather than politicians. (1995, p. 254)

She continues to stress the fact that the committee system could have survived in the politics if the colonial authorities had screened themselves from the strength of ethnic politics witnessed before the 1930s and 1940s.

This laid the very foundation to the emergence of the Sinhalese Buddhist Revolution with the patronage of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike when the Sinhalese re-conquest initiated in 1931 was revived in 1956, creating a turning point in Sri Lankan politics at that time. Due to this reason, Sinhalese political leadership started demonstrating themselves as the "protectors of race, land and faith." Therefore it is apparent that Ceylonese ethnic politics have not been contained as its existence was accepted and displayed by the exercise of democratic politics.

However, Tambiah states that, traditional religion –political-linguistic ideology by the Sinhalese majority had proved to have contributed in the short run to liberate collective energies, to politicize the general public and to enable them to participate in a democratic form of politics (1989, p. 141).


## 2. Colonization Factor


The "colonization" of land is considered as one of the intractable areas in which the ethnic conflict has come into being. Out of the two major political parties which competed for the majority Sinhalese votes, the creation of agricultural settlements was related primarily to the policy decisions taken by the United National Party (UNP).

For instance, it was during the regime of J.R. Jayawardene (1977-88) when both the level of violence and colonization in the Dry Zone between the Sinhalese and the Tamils increased significantly. According to Peebles (1990), this resulted in changes in the distribution of population that raised some issues of general interest in the course of ethnic conflict. Moreover, he states that "colonization" has been a policy of the present Sinhalese nationalism. Neither the predominance of the Sinhalese nor

the Buddhist character of the settlements is by itself offensive; however, these could develop in the long-term as the interests of the nation as a whole (1990, p. 30).

Nevertheless, the perseverance that Sinhalese colonization possesses a privilege on historical grounds in which the resources of the state are dedicated to one community without equal distribution among others, is considered as "intolerable". It is believed that for half a century the government implemented a colonization policy for the benefit of the Sinhalese majority despite Tamil protests, which were met with apparent impunity. Thus the Jayawardene government carried out its willful policy, leaving no room for reconciliation of Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil nationalism. Peebles points out that the ultimate consequence has been the continuation of Sinhalese Buddhist colonies at the expense of massacres by Tamil separatist guerillas (1990, p. 52).

However, Kearney (1989) affirms that communal rivalry and confrontation in politics emerged within the earlier stages of independence from British rule in 1948 as each community strived to preserve their ethnic heritage and identity by promoting their ethnic symbols. In this exercise , the collective attempts of the Sinhalese to revive their ethnic heritage and reassert their position as the majority of the Island's population which was undermined by centuries of colonial rule, collided with Tamil aspirations to defend their community from domination and possible assimilation by the Sinhalese majority. Furthermore, Kearney states that when the communal division of language and religion surfaced the politics of Sri Lanka, the vulnerability as an ethnic minority became starkly evident for Tamils.

Kapferer (2010) concentrates on the underlying forces behind ethnic violence in Sri Lanka in the context of colonial and post colonial and economic point of view, with some reference to the recent processes of globalization that caused changes in structures of the state and the development of gradual partiality within them. Through his study Kapferer, has tried to transcend the traditional, well-used perspectives on nationalism, ethnicity and violence in order to understand some of the vacillating aspects of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (2010, p. 33).

## 3. Linguistic Nationalism

As De Silva (1986) sees it, the adoption of the first Republican constitution in 1972 marked the critical starting point of a new era in the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka. It was a destabilizing phase which saw the achievement of the linguistic nationalism of the Sinhalese, strengthened by a new political and institutional framework which threatened its corresponding Tamil version which took to its conclusion of forming a separatist movement.

Beginning from May 1972, the Sri Lankan Tamils changed their demands from structural changes and constitutional reforms into an assertion of the right of self-determination on the grounds of a Tamil state in Sri Lanka. This transformation of demands marked the culmination of a process of political thinking initiated with the foundation laid by the Federal Party (FP) in 1949. This new political demand managed to attract political support not only from groups that were not identified with or hostile to FP, but also its traditional rival- the Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Workers Congress for a brief period.

According to Wilson (1988), the "Sinhala Only" policy of the government enacted in 1956 and implemented in part of 1960, resulted in a rigorous exclusion of Tamil-medium graduates from employment opportunities in public and even private sectors. Tamils who were already employed were perturbed to continue service in the public sector while employment in the private sector was beyond the reach of educated Tamils.

During the period 1956-1977, there was a significant expansion of the public sector, including nationalization and the appointments were alleged to be highly politicized as "Sinhalese were given preference if not near monopoly in the vacancies for positions."

The policy decision taken by Mrs. Bandaranaike's 1970-1977 government to give preference to Sinhalese elites was the last straw for Tamil elites to turn to the concept of a separate state. On the whole, even though the Federalists failed to make

amendments to the Sinhalese Only act they managed to win over Tamils in general and form a greater unity among those of North and East in particular against the "dangers of 'Sinhalese linguistic imperialism." (1988, p. 108)

Moreover, Ropers (2008) notices a broader consensus in the historical, social scientific discourse between the key factors and turning-points of the ethnic conflict such as the "Sinhala Only Act" from 1956 (which established Sinhala as the only official language), the constitutions of 1972 and 1978 (which gave prominence to Buddhism and established the "Unitary State" respectively), various waves of riots against Tamils in July 1983 and with further reference to early history, the disparity of opinions in historical ownership of land (of the legitimate claims to the island), the role of religion and accountability of the existing governments for the outbreaks of mob violence.

## 4. Institutional Decay

According to Devota's (2005) point of view it is stated that starting from 1950s Sri Lankan politicians who represented the majority Sinhalese community have exploited ethnic outbidding as a means to attain power and thereby caused the systematic marginalization of the minority Tamils. In his article he argues that institutional decay, caused by the dialectic between majority rule and ethnic factor have paved the way for Tamil mobilization and caused an ethnic conflict that took nearly 70,000 lives over the past decades.

He analyses the role of the informal society in influencing the formal state institutions and how it contributed to institutional decay. By evaluating the relationship between social organizations and the Sri Lankan state he depicts how the various institutions were guided by "actions and fashion motives" that eventually unleashed a deadly conflict in the country.

## 5. Extremist Politics

Siriweera (1980) observes that the emergence of Tamil Separatist movement and various Sinhala chauvinistic movements have surfaced as a result of uncertainties generated by the possibility of national disintegration. Examining the reasons for the development of those political movements and the response of the government towards becomes as complex in nature as the events that led to Tamil separatism. In the recent past, the contradictions in Sinhala- Tamil relations have become insoluble (1980, pp. 903-913).

The call for the establishment of a separate state of Tamil Eelam was raised with increased volume with the formation of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Siriweera gives an instance when it was explicitly displayed as follows:

"At its national convention held at Pannakam on 14th May 1976 the TULF unanimously passed a resolution for the establishment of a separate state Tamil Eelam" (1980, 903).

Accordingly, the TULF won the general elections of 1977, advocating separatism by claiming that the consecutive Sinhala-governments have taken discriminatory measures against the Tamils in the areas of education, employment, land alienation, the state colonization schemes, and the use of Tamil language. Furthermore, Siriweera states that TULF maintained their view that the main problem to be solved was "whether the Tamils wanted their freedom or continued servitude to the Sinhala-dominated government (1980, p. 903)."

## 6. State Building

Rupasinghe (2006) observes that the failure to share authority with other communities and intolerance shown towards their language and participation have caused the marginalization and alienation of the Tamils in state building. It is noted that nation building was entirely based on the assertion of Sinhalese "hegemonic dominance" over

the state rather than a more inclusive, participatory approach in power sharing. A moderate, nonviolent settlement of the dispute was not possible at the time when the young generation of Tamils took arms for a separate nation through military confrontation (2000, p. xvi).

## 6. Economic Liberation

The economic liberalization that took place in 1977 by the center-right government introduced changes not only into the economic system, but also to the Westminster-style democratic system by instituting a centralized system of governance with an elected executive president as the head of government. These institutional changes and their implementation are presumed as the background on which the conflicts between the central government and the Tamil militants have occurred in the early 1980s.

According to Gamage (2009) economic liberalization, changes in governance and the conflict between the government and LTTE are the significant economic, political and cultural changes Sri Lanka has experienced for the last four decades which formed the environment for the outbreak of ethnic conflict in the post 1977 era (2009, p. 247).

## 6. Ideologies and Realities

As Gunathilleke (1998) sees, the development of the ethnic conflict has been influenced by the way in which the ideologies of the Tamils and Sinhalese have evolved and took shape after independence and how their issues and grievances were linked with ethnocentric objectives over time.

Gunathilleke (1998) in his analysis of collective identities of Sri Lanka defines the three levels at which the conflict has developed since independence.

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At the initial level, the issues were related to arguments on constitutional provisions for equal opportunities for minorities to participate in governance in the areas where they were a majority.

At another, they were concerned about specific government policies such as the language of administration, the new agricultural settlements in the North East or the scheme of recruitment to universities.

At the third level, it was related to the fundamental conditions of safety and security in the prevalence of ethnic violence.

This indicates how the ideological issues of the Tamils and Sinhalese shifted from the specific to practical level as the ethnic conflict affected their comparative ethno-cultural identities (1988, p. 364).

For instance, the Sinhala Buddhist ideology held a long history which contributed to the revival of the Sinhala Buddhist culture emerged with the support of the Buddhist leadership in the 19th and 20th century. But the federal ideology of the Tamils does not share the same characteristics. The Sinhala Buddhist ideology itself was backed by a religious revivalist movement to counter the mounting pressure from Western values and life styles imposed under the colonial regime. There were debates and controversies on the philosophical fundamentals of Buddhism and Christianity at doctrinal level which resembled the historical religious debates between Sankaracharya and his opponents (1988, p. 381).

## 6. State Formation

As Uyangoda (2007) sees in the politics of electoral competition, a constant resistance was shown in the proposals on power-sharing, based on the perception that it might lead to a deviation within the unitary state framework by facilitating minority succession. Furthermore, Uyangoda (2011) states that a state formation of conflict requires a state reform for its resolution. But state reforms are easier proposed than implemented. State formation conflicts are thus propelled forward by the persistent

resistance from within to reform the state. This is the reform paradox of a state formation conflict. As the Sri Lankan case demonstrates this reform paradox, it provides the conflict with its main reproductive capacity.

Therefore State formation in Sri Lanka since 1950s has been entrapped in ethicized electoral politics and the resistance of power sharing gained impetus with the social mobilization after the failure of peace talks in 2002-2003 (2007, p. 10).

The post-colonial state of Sri Lanka has been viewed by Sinhalese nationalists as a politically secure state for the majority community, with full control over the institutions of power without any threat from the minorities. They expected the state to preserve their ethnic hierarchy within the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities and wanted to be accepted as the majority. This vision has been outlined in constitutional and structural terms and transformed into the idea of a unitary state. The author states that the intense competition that they faced from the minorities before the political independence in 1947 may have formed this particular world view of the Sinhalese.

The vision of a unitary state was displayed in the core political ideology of the Sinhalese in the post colonial era. According to De Votta (2006) the electoral competition between the major Sinhalese political parties had occurred within the framework of "ethnic outbidding' which provided impetus for specific political resistance to state reform. The ethnic conflict which surmounted in the 1980s did not change this unitary agenda of state formation. It further strengthened the argument against state reforms towards power-sharing in the post-colonial state of Sri Lanka. The perception that devolution of power would lead to weakening of the unitary state by strengthening the Tamil agenda of succession was insisted by the Sinhalese nationalist groups.

Consequently, the resistant outlook of the Sinhalese majority towards state formation has in turn created the rationale for a parallel state formation for the polity, whose demands were based on federalist constitutional reforms from the1950s up to 1970s. As the experience of discrimination and grievances of identity were the central issues of concern, Tamil nationalists viewed regional autonomy as the counteractive method to the politics of the majority.

Gunawardena (1985) views the "Sinhalese Buddhist" as a new form of identity among the Sinhalese founded by Anagarika Dharmapala in the twentieth century which distinguished that group of people from Sinhalese of other faiths. He notices that in the context of colonial rule, it was possible to form the "Sinhalese consciousness", which could be extended as a means of mass mobilization of the Sinhala linguistic group as the "inhabitants of the Island." This consciousness has developed with a positive appreciation of the common culture which is shared by that section of the population and it instigated the nationalist movement with certain anti-imperialist motives. However, Gunawardena claims that Sinhala ideology does not keep itself to being categorized simply as an anti-imperialist ideology (1985, p. 95).

Gunasinghe (2011) brings out the incidents of 1915 anti- Muslim riots and the 1958 Sinhala-Tamil clashes to illustrate that the riots of 1983 are not the only occasion of mass violence directed against ethnic minorities. However, he points out that anti-Tamil riots have increased their frequency, localization and devastation from 1977 onwards, culminating in the holocaust in July 1983. In his view, ethno-religious rivalries have been present in the historical past of the country with occasional outbreaks of violence, until 1977 there was no ethno-religious riots have occurred since the 1915 anti- Muslim riots. Gunasinghe highlights that this area has been relatively under-researched and he tries to understand the fundamental connotation of war in terms of the relationship between patron-client relations and a globalizing economy. He reiterates the significance of the peace process and political reforms in the formation of a national identity and loyalty. His main objective through the study of the root causes of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is to explain how the fate of "liberal peace" corresponded to the liberal reforms in Sri Lanka.

It is apparent that the correct identification and importance of root causes in the process of building peace in Sri Lanka is important since it has been elaborated with great complexity and depth by several scholars. Therefore the above theoretical debates indicate how root causes should be addressed in order to prevent the recurrence of the conflict as well as for lasting peace. By miscalculating the importance of root causes to the peace building it may endanger the possibility of

gaining lasting peace.


**Conclusion**

It is understandable through the above theoretical debates on root causes that it plays a crucial role in initiating conflict in Sri Lanka, such instances has been provided by several scholars. Such as Paris (2004) addressing the issue of root causes has to be considered as a priority in the strategy of peace building in Sri Lanka. The responsibility of addressing the root causes on socioeconomic injustices suffered by most victims/survivors of political violence should be taken up by the state, as a rights-based approach which treats development as a matter of state obligation and of citizens' rights rather than as a subject to diplomacy or a sign of help. Thus, post conflict recovery work would be decentralized, with greater likelihood of ensuring lasting peace. The peace building activities should focus on rebuilding and rehabilitating all sectors of the war-torn society which will further encourage and support interaction between all sectors of society in order to repair damaged relations and start the process of restoring dignity and trust. Further addressing of the socioeconomic roots of conflict in terms of rights helps to expand the notion of justice and will help reduce the country's risk of reversion to war.

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