

Self-Destruction of Sri Lanka **By George Katsiaficas**

Note: This short book was written in December 2014 after a month-long research trip to Sri Lanka. Soon thereafter, President Mahinda Rajapaksa was ousted in a surprise election defeat. By 2022, the Rajapaksa family was back in power, with Mahinda's brother Gotabaya as president, and other brothers as finance minister, prime minister and agriculture minister. A nephew is sports minister. Their corrupt policies have led the country to its worst financial crisis in history. Necessities such as fuel, medicines and even paper are in short supply. Militant and increasingly large protests occur, but as of April 25, 2022, they have failed to oust the Rajapaksa clan. I locate present troubles with a long history of self-destructive behavior by the island's elites. My heartfelt thanks to all those who helped me better understand the complicated past and troubling future prospects.

Something is rotten in the “democratic socialist” state of Sri Lanka. Since 1971, tens of thousands of people have disappeared. Daily abuse of citizens by police and military personnel is today routine—and goes unpunished. Sexual torture through sticks and hot pepper powder is widely practiced. Families who complain of such torture are themselves subject to interrogation and torture. Old mothers who speak out in public are pushed in the mud.

Sri Lanka's suffering apparently has no bounds. According to a United Nations panel, the 2009 government's final assault on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) killed as many as 40,000 civilians, most victims of indiscriminate shelling by Sri Lankan forces. In addition, not directly related to the country's civil war between the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and separatist Hindu Tamils, an additional 30,000 or more people (some say 100,000)—trade unionists, student activists, neighborhood organizers, and uninvolved citizens—have disappeared, many burned beyond recognition through tire “necklaces” after which their bodies were unceremoniously dumped on roadsides, thrown into ditches, or left in town squares.

In very few places has contemporary history been more punctuated with uprisings than in Sri Lanka, where southern Sinhalese radicals launched armed insurrections in 1971 and 1987 and Tamil separatists fought a civil war from 1974 to 2009. Tamils established their own government and armed forces including Sea Tigers and Air Tigers before they were decisively defeated, and the two southern uprisings were also ruthlessly suppressed. The outcome of Sri Lanka's uprisings was the opposite of what their partisans intended. As the state's machinery of violence was murderously employed

with tens of thousands of victims, the army and police saw their numbers and weapons multiply. Today, Sinhalese cower as police abuse goes unchecked, and minority Tamils are a captive people subject to capricious disappearances and arrest.

The country has descended into what at best could be described as illiberal democracy, a system where elections function but repression and family despotism remain the order of the day—no matter which party is in power.

In 2013, Basil Fernando and the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), a respected Hong Kong-based association of lawyers, journalists and activists from over 15 countries, issued a new book which recounts the daily abuse suffered by ordinary citizens at the hands of the police.¹ The sheer number of cases meticulously recorded by the AHRC speaks volumes to the fact that police abuse is systematic. None of the 401 victims—a sampling of the 1500 cases documented by AHRC between 1998 and 2011—whose sad story is recovered here was even remotely connected to terrorism or political conflict. Rather, these are human beings modestly eking out a living who randomly become a way for the police to “solve” a criminal investigation by extracting a confession using the most expedient and speedy means—torture.

One of the reasons why innocent people are randomly rounded up and beaten is so police can close open cases. When torture does not produce a confession, “proof” is fabricated for compliant judges. Politicians could help, but do so only when in their own financial or political interests. Opposition political meetings are attacked, and even one of the county's best-known intellectuals, the late Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, was physically assaulted. The trade union movement has yet to recover from the nationwide general strike of 1980 when all workers who participated—at least 40,000—were fired. Continual assaults on workers more recently go unpunished. One young worker in the Free Trade Zone (a favorite place for police violence) was shot by police, apparently at random. When complaints were brought into the political arena, the outcome—one of the few cases when some remedial action was taken—was a transfer of police to another station. The press has been muzzled and almost all investigative journalists, fearful for their lives, have left the country.

¹ *Narrative of Justice: told through stories of torture victims*, by Basil Fernando (Hong Kong: Asian Human Rights Commission, 2013)

When complaints against the police are filed, witnesses are routinely threatened with reprisals, as are victims' families. Even when the legal process goes forward, the AHRC believes that "credible investigations into torture do not exist" because ad hoc constitutional revisions aimed at giving the president unlimited authority in the fight against the LTTE eliminated many oversight provisions. The president is "absolutely immune from any kind of prosecution."

The debate in the US on the use of waterboarding, sleep denial, sensory deprivation, and other odious forms of questioning revolves around people suspected of being involved in al Qaeda or related organizations that seek to launch attacks on US interests. (I am totally opposed to torture even in "terrorist" cases, as are some 41 percent of US respondents who, in a 2012 poll, said torture is rarely or never justified—a percentage of people outnumbered by 47 percent who said it is always or sometimes justified.) Yet the cases under scrutiny in the AHRC book have nothing to do with the Tamil Tigers, al Qaeda or any political activity. These are daily occurrences that revolve for the most part around petty crimes, for which the police simply grab the nearest defenseless citizen on whom they can place the blame.

The 401 accounts provided by AHRC reveal a shocking level of police callousness and disregard for even elementary precepts of justice. A typical case occurs in the following manner. An innocent bystander who happens to be in the vicinity when some small crime is committed is summoned to the police station for questioning. Without any due process or expressed rationale, torture is applied to extract a confession. The victim is first slapped and rudely questioned. When that fails to provide the required confession, several police conduct beatings while the victim hangs from an overhead beam or is tied to a chair. When such means of "interrogation" fail to achieve resolution of the open investigation through a confession, other methods are applied. One recent addition to the panoply of torture has been to insert chili powder into the vagina, mouth or anus of the victim, leaving many innocent people with no recourse but to admit to the crime in question rather than to face continuing torture. In cases where rape and murder have been carried out by police, they hurriedly create false tales of what transpired.

In none of the cases discussed in this book were the police perpetrators of torture convicted by a court of law—nor were any of the alleged criminals convicted through a trial by a jury of their peers in a court of law. A

businessman hires police to kill another to whom he owes money. Although caught, neither the policeman nor the man who hired him to murder goes to prison. Another policeman kidnaps and rapes a woman who has refused to marry him. Afterwards, when she complains to the authorities, the residents of the house where she was held testify that she came voluntarily and enjoyed herself.

Compounding the callous behavior of the police in small substations is the legitimization of police torture at the highest level of government. After his final victory over the 26-year insurgency of the Tamil Tigers, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has ridden high in the saddle, imaging himself a modern-day Dutthagamani, legendary victor over the Tamils more than two millennia ago.

After winning a landslide re-election victory in January 2010, Rajapaksa has ensconced his family at the center of the country's political system to accommodate his plans to remake the country his own image. Massive photos of him adorn billboards everywhere. His son is an MP, two brothers are ministers, and four of his six brothers control up to 70% of the national budget. Soon to be recognized as some of the planet's newest billionaires, the Rajapaksa clan has eviscerated Sri Lanka's judiciary. Facing resistance to their parliamentary initiative that land could be taken by the national government without the agreement of provincial councils as constitutionally mandated, an impeachment motion against Chief Justice Dr. Shirani Bandaranayake was facilitated by Speaker of the Parliament Chamal Rajapaksa (elder brother of the president) on 1 November 2012, the day after the Supreme Court's determinations were forwarded to the president. Three other justices of the Supreme Court determined that parliament had no authority to act against the Supreme Court, a finding upheld by an Appeals Court. Lacking constitutional authority, President Rajapaksa insisted Bandaranayake leave her post. When the Chief Justice refused, her family's lives were threatened. Finally, she did vacate the building, but only before publicly announcing her fear for her family's lives as her reason. Two Appeals Court judges also received letters threatening their lives. The removal of the Chief Justice indicates that separation of powers as mandated by the constitution has lost significance.

On July 3, 2013—fully four years after the complete defeat of all insurgencies—President Rajapaksa signed an executive order that placed the whole country under emergency rule for reasons of national security. Under this order, the army shot into a crowd of non-violently protesting villagers in

Rathupaswela, Weliweriya. For months, people in a dozen villages in that region had complained to the authorities that their well water was undrinkable due to a nearby factory. Even walking through their ponds caused irritation to the feet of people. On August 1, 2013, people were peacefully protesting the poisoning of their wells, and the government's response was bullets: at least two people were killed and 25 wounded. The Weliweriya factory produces industrial gloves for export and is tied to Basil Rajapaksa, younger brother of the president and currently Minister of Economic Development. As if anyone needed further proof, the employment of the military to suppress dissent clarifies that state power supports the Rajapaksa family's nepotistic rule.

The abuse of power in Weliweriya indicates that Sri Lanka's downward spiral into autocracy under the name of democracy and socialism will leave thousands more lives in ruins while a handful around the Rajapaksa clan enrich themselves. The daily torture and abuses suffered by people leaves a scar on society that will not rapidly heal. As internationally respected psychologist Dr. Rajat Mitra summarized: "These narratives of trauma will seriously affect the fabric of society even 50 years from now and affect how people become immune to happenings around them; until and unless there is accountability and people decide to act."

Will the people of Sri Lanka be able to create an island paradise? Or will they cower under the iron heel of class, caste and national oppression? Only they will be able to answer these questions.

For years now, I've maintained that revolutions and uprisings are a key dimension of the elevation of our species. Within the actions of insurgents I've uncovered a kind of universal grammar uniting all of humanity.² As far as I know, we are the only species to create governments and overthrow them, to institute cultural conventions and transform them. No matter what language we speak, what all humans desire—and need—is freedom. It's a word that resonates universally, and rightfully so.

Long before independence, Ceylon was an island of perpetual ferment. Uprisings against the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British—each of whom ruled for about a century and a half—occurred regularly, not only as religious

² See "Eros and Revolution" in *Radical History Review* 16:2 (2013) 491-505

challenges to Christianity but also as anti-colonial political struggles and class-based agitations against the impoverished conditions of the island's working-class. In addition, insurgencies against the supremacy of the *Goyigama* caste reshaped the national psyche and helped to form a Buddhist revival movement that transformed people's identities and propelled them to break the chains of colonialism.

Yet when we comprehend the grief and suffering of Sri Lankans brought on by their attempts to win freedom struggles, when we read the sheer number recently massacred—some 100,000 in a few decades—persons beheaded, bodies burned, women raped and shot through their vaginas, corpses left to rot in unknown places after being made unrecognizable by tire necklaces—how can we speak of a promising future?

The horror Sri Lankans know is unique to them. Their suffering is unlike that of Vietnamese, who were massacred and killed by foreigners—and who emerged victorious from their revolutions, walking proudly today in their cities where cafes have names like victory and peace. Cambodia too suffered even a far worse proportion of population killed; yet their fate can be comprehended as having taken place in a society pulverized by massive and illegal US bombardment and invasion.

To write of uprisings in a society traumatized by them is to commit some kind of offense—unless what is written seeks to make sense of them in order not to repeat their mistakes, in order to continue the struggle for freedom in new forms. Uprisings illuminate history, reveal people's emergent dreams—as well as the nightmare of violence.

Memory of a Past That Never Was

Looking at the distant past, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) is remembered as an island paradise. At the time of the Buddha, people there quickly adopted his non-violent teachings, and the island became a transmission belt for the spread of Buddhism to lands far to the east—including Burma (now Myanmar) and Siam (Thailand). It is said that Mahinda, the son of Asoka—the great Indian emperor who adopted and transmitted Buddha’s teachings—visited the island, and that his sister, Sangamitta, brought with her shoots of the famed Bo tree which, like Buddhism, took root and flourished. Centuries after Buddhism all but disappeared from India, Ceylon remained majority Buddhist.

According to the *Mahavamsa* (one of the earliest written history of the island), Lanka was a repository of Buddhism in its purest form, and the Sinhalese were “chosen” to preserve it. Distinguished professor Stanley Tambiah dismisses such claims without discussion, asserting that “One thing is clear: a primordial golden age with a perfect fit between Sinhala people, Sinhala language, Buddhism and the entire territorial space of the island could not have existed in Dutthagamani’s time, and probably did not exist at the time the *Mahavamsa* was composed.”³

While there were epochs in Sri Lanka's past when religious harmony and coexistence blossomed, the appearance of tolerance may have camouflaged embers of distrust and suspicion that have erupted into violent conflagrations in recent times. No later than the second century BC, a group of Tamil-speaking Hindus from South India settled on the island, and three Tamil kings ruled the country. Written in the sixth-century CE, the *Mahavamsa* romanticizes the historical past as a time when religion, territory, and people were liberated after Dutthagamani defeated Tamil invaders. The word Sinhala is thought to have been used for the first time in Sri Lankan sources only a few centuries earlier—in the fourth or fifth century. Historians continue to

³ Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 137

question whether it was before the reign of Mahinda IV from 956-972 or by the 12th century) that Sinhala became a distinct linguistic group.⁴

When the Portuguese first arrived in the early 16th century, the island contained three separate kingdoms: Kotte, Kandy and Jaffna—the first two were Sinhalese Buddhist while Jaffna was Tamil Hindu. Only Kandy remained free from Portuguese domination, which was confined to maritime fortresses. During this period, the majority of those who converted to Roman Catholicism were from the fishermen caste (*Karawa*). This caste has contributed mightily to the island's social movements.

Neither the Portuguese nor the Dutch were able to gain control of the entire island, and resistance to their rule confined them to heavily fortified naval fortresses. But in 1815—less than 20 years after they replaced the Dutch in 1796—the British were able to penetrate the inland kingdom of Kandy. Using their familiar divide-and-conquer tactics, they mobilized the Kandyan nobility to overthrow the last native king of Kandy, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, a Tamil. Although British propaganda depicts the king as savage and his people's lives as barbaric, he had restored temples and sponsored elaborate Buddhist ceremonies. Within a few years, it was clear that the people of Ceylon did not accept British rule. During the uprising of 1818—three short years after the king was deposed—thousands of rebels were killed as the British mounted “search and destroy” missions to quell the nationwide insurrection.⁵ By the time the British emerged victorious, the entire island was under control of a single power for the first time since 1466. British imperialism's superior military power, revealed in its ability to conquer the entire island (a task neither the Portuguese nor the Dutch could complete), had the effect of uniting all of Sri Lanka into one administrative unit. By destroying the autonomy of Sri Lankan kingdoms, the British laid the groundwork for the ethnic strife that continues to afflict the country.

During their reign, the British thoroughly transformed indigenous traditional forms of government and economy, destroying the feudal system that had

⁴ Gunawardena in Tambiah, 132; R.A.L.H. Gunawardena, "The People of the Lion: Sinhala Consciousness in History and Historiography," *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Navamaga Printers, 1985) 97 and K.M.O. Dharmadasa "Ethnic Identity, Ideology and Historical Revisionism in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 15 (1989) in Tambiah, 136

⁵ K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publishers, 2005) 303

remained intact for more than two millennia and instituting a regime of capital accumulation that impoverished many to enrich the few. For four decades, coffee plantations served as the basis for export-oriented agriculture, but after a leaf disease destroyed the plants, replacement crops such as tea, rubber and coconut became widely grown. Prior to the conquest by Great Britain, Sri Lanka had imported very little rice, but after the island's coffee crop became a source of colonial wealth, rice imports climbed to feed estate laborers as well as urban workers in plantation related services.

Before the British, communal riots were unheard of, no Tamils lived in Colombo, and starvation was unknown on the fertile island. By imposing their dynamic capitalist system, British imperial rule quickly changed all that. In 1840, all land was declared property of the British crown "until the contrary was proved." The peasantry was thereby evicted and turned into wage-laborers either on plantations or in the newly expanding cities and towns. After tea, rubber and coconut became the island's main exports, refusal of Sinhalese villagers to move to large estates prompted the British to step up recruitment of South Indian Tamils to move to the island, a task facilitated by colonialism-induced famine and poverty in India. The number of plantation laborers imported from India swelled to 235,000 by 1891 and nearly a million by independence in 1948, some 10% of the island's population.

After uniting the island's three autonomous kingdoms into a single unitary comprador state, the British compelled the natives to build their roads and staff imperial offices. Once they had gained control of the entire island, the British privileged the indigenous Tamil minority, in order to rule over the Sinhalese, thereby contributing greatly to future ethnic conflicts. This familiar divide-and-conquer strategy has left much of the post-colonial world in chaos. In more ways than is commonly understood, India and Pakistan continue to suffer the consequences of British rule.

Centuries of colonial oppression at the hands of Portuguese, Dutch and British conquerors left the island vulnerable to imposition of willful individuals. Although often invisible in comparison to its immense neighbors, Sri Lanka, makes a classic case study of the dire long-term results of European colonialism. Used by the British to suppress the Buddhist majority, education became a central concern after independence in 1948. Postcolonial governments devoted disproportionate resources to expanding and enhancing the educational system, with the unintended side effect of producing hundreds of thousands of well-educated young people whose career possibilities were

limited, if not nonexistent. As a result of frustration with the lack of genuine opportunities and state repression, massive youth-led uprisings in 1971 and 1987 led to tens of thousands of people being brutally killed.

To understand the significance of education in Sri Lanka, we should recall that in 1868, when the island was under British rule, there was not even one non-Christian school in the country. There were no Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim schools at all out of the more than 900 formally recognized schools and more than 400 others administered by various missionary groups.⁶

While missionaries sought to convert people's souls, they also produced a tiny comprador elite, or "Brown British" as they were sarcastically called. The official language of administration was English, and both Christians and Tamils enjoyed disproportionate access to government jobs. Britain ruled the island through agents of the East India Tea Company, the same joint-stock corporation attacked at the Boston Tea Party. Excluded from the capitalist class and unwilling to do their work, Lankans were largely marginalized and repressed. For those more sympathetic to the West, the British lifted Lankans from feudalism, abolished *Rajakariya* (the granting of land to farm in exchange for service to the king), and "modernized" the island. Of course, they mercilessly crushed attempts to end their imperial rule.

The British legacy of a nation-state without a unified nation is typical of their many of their former colonies.⁷ The British had bestowed privileges and favoritism upon the Tamil minority not only in education but also in very desirable government jobs. At independence, Tamils were well less than 20% of population but comprised some 30% of civil servants, 40% of the military, and 60% of professionals employed by the colonial government. (By 1973, these numbers had dropped to 5%, 1% and 10%.)⁸

Although nearly 75% of Lanka's people are Sinhala, the island's diversity includes substantial minorities: Tamils (17%, about a third of whom are estate

⁶ Victor Ivan, *Revolt in the Temple: The Buddhist Revival up to Gangodawila Soma Thera* (Maharagama: Ravaya, 2009) 45

⁷ Victor Ivan, *Paradise in Tears: A Journey Through History and Conflict* (Colombo: Sahajeevana Centre for Coexistence, 2008) 9

⁸ Z.C. Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Government and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011) 100

laborers), Muslims (7%), as well as Malays, Burghers (Europeanized Lankans), and Eurasians – the latter three being descendants of colonial powers. Some 70% of the people are Buddhist, while Hindus comprise 15%, Muslims 7%, and Protestants and Catholics 8%. The island's hospitality was such that a tiny number of early Christians survived for centuries until they were “discovered” with the arrival of the Portuguese.

Buddhism may have been born in Nepal and India, but it did not survive into the modern epoch in India. Only the conversion of Ambedhkar in 1956 along with some 500,000 of his followers led to the revitalization of Indian Buddhism—a conscious attempt to undermine the pernicious effects of the caste system that continues to plague tens of millions of Dalits (untouchables) and creates a huge obstacle to India’s progress into the modern world. The European Renaissance revived a backward realm, propelling it through science and liberty to global imperial conquests. India has had five renaissances, but it remains mired in a caste system that enervates the country. With more than 200 million Dalits, India contains the vast majority of the world’s untouchables, but Sri Lanka’s five million, some 20 to 30 percent of the population, is perhaps the world’s highest per capita number of lower caste people. Sri Lanka’s complicated social structure contains three parallel caste systems—for Sinhalese, indigenous Tamils, and Indian laborers—and it is reputed to be among the least onerous, yet unsavory jobs such as shit cleaning and garbage collection are still inherited for generations.

Hinduism’s influence in Sri Lanka has been widespread. As Buddha was assimilated into the Hindu pantheon as a reincarnation of Vishnu, Sinhalese continued to propagate his teachings. The *Mahavamsa*, portrayed Sri Lanka as the chosen land of the Buddha, destined to protect and propagate his teachings. It promised that that Buddhism would prevail for five thousand years, during which time, the Sinhalese—and they alone—must protect it.

Seven major invasions from India, the last of which in 1215 destroyed the entire infrastructure of a blossoming agricultural civilization and introduced the caste system. In Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya, great royal cities were laboriously constructed with massive, painstakingly designed irrigation works.

Reaching into the distant past, the autonomy of Sri Lanka has been under continual threat from expansionist kingdoms on the Indian subcontinent.

While there have been periods of cooperation and friendship, islanders recall with great bitterness the Chola invasions, which ravaged both the Anuradhapura and Pollunawara centers of advanced agricultural civilizations. So great was the devastation from the Chola conquests that the center of Lankan life shifted from the east and center of the island to the far southwest, where the task of rebuilding was once again compelled to be undertaken. Jungles were cleared and a new city—present-day Colombo—slowly developed into the island's economic and political center.

Ancient Pali chronicles from Ceylon record the extent of Buddhism in South Asia, a region devastated by Mongol invasions of the 13th century. Sri Lanka served as a sanctuary of Buddhism in this harsh era, and when the wave of Mongol repression subsided, the island provided fresh inspiration and leadership for the rekindling of Buddhism on the mainland.

My digression into a discussion of Buddhism anticipates the reaction of many Westerners to Sri Lanka's recent bloodletting and torturous history. Looking at the roots of the conflict in Sri Lanka, one cannot help but be surprised by the involvement of Buddhist monks in episodes of great violence. Many of us stop in disbelief when we hear reports of Buddhist police torturing innocent women, children and men, of Buddhist armies slaughtering tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Yet Christianity also preaches non-violence while condoning war and praying for victory. We should not react with indignation in the face of Buddhist hypocrisy while we accept as normal Christian atrocities on a much larger scale and over a wider swath of lands and peoples.

The Buddhist Revival

One of the vehicles carrying Sinhalese nationalism to its extreme expression today is undoubtedly the Buddhist revival—a key part of the anti-colonial movement that ended 450 years of European rule. With their base in rural villages, Buddhist monks played central roles in the island’s quest for independence, and after the British left in 1948, monks mobilized subaltern groups to fight against the urban westernized elite that has dominated Sri Lanka in the postcolonial epoch.

As a distinct social group, island-dwelling people have a unique relationship to outsiders from mainland cultures, which typically came to dominate them. The fate of thousands of the planet’s islands has been absorption into mainland cultures, although two notable exceptions come to mind: Japan and Britain. Both were large enough to contain millions of inhabitants, and they proved historically able to spawn monarchies that conquered others, a task their people turned to with ambition and zeal.

In his essay “The Island of Ireland” Ernest Jones postulated that island dwellers have a different emotional attachment to their home ground than do mainland dwellers. People who live surrounded by the sea have a sense of security reminiscent to the unconscious of the condition of being inside the mother’s womb. As a result, islanders’ matricentric emotional characteristics produce close attachment to native soil and fierce resentment of the intervention of outsiders (who would be considered as foreign fathers seeking to claim control of their mother).

British imperialism’s creation of the contemporary Indian nation-state had the effect of exacerbating the insecurities and inferiority complex of Sinhalese people. Just off shore from more than one billion Indians, twenty million Sri Lankans cannot help but cherish their autonomy and independence. The presence of hundreds of millions of Hindus in close proximity is one of the reasons that Buddhists, a majority of the island’s population, nonetheless have a minority complex, a sense of being outnumbered and subservient which impels them to take offensive action against their own Hindu minority. Indeed, as many people reminded me, Sri Lanka is dwarfed even by the sole Indian state of Tamil Nadu’s 67 million people.

After independence, with Britain's repressive fist at a distance, Buddhists seized the initiative to restore their lost hegemony, a long-cherished dream nourished by all major parties. The country's constitution of 1972, which formally changed Ceylon into Sri Lanka, included Buddhism's "foremost" status on the island.

More than any other alternative future, monks' vision of a coming paradise, based upon the memory of a Buddhist utopian past, motivates people to do whatever is needed to preserve the "unity and sovereignty" of Sri Lanka. Ironically the myth of an island paradise promulgated by the urban upper class is of harmonious peasant villages in which monks are at the center of communal life, a myth that has enhanced the central position of monks in rural areas. Divided by caste, the Buddhist *Sangha* (community) receives most of its recruits from poor village youth, often attracted by educational opportunities and other benefits.⁹ For millions of Lankans excluded from even a semblance of elegant city life enjoyed by the elite, the village temple and monks' school are the center of their community.

The Buddhist myth of pre-colonial peace and tranquility serves to project onto the future a cultural glorification of the past equivalent in the West to countercultural dreams of a future of peace and love. Exhorting "sons of the soil" to fight "immigrant people" for the "unity and sovereignty" of Ceylon, monks advocate resettlement of long vacant agricultural lands almost as a holy obligation, as well as a means of expanding Sinhalese control. Strident Buddhist nationalism continues to polarize the country, dividing even the Catholic Church between Sinhalese nationalists and defenders of the Tamil minority. For their ability to deliver voters on election day, monks are well rewarded by political parties with homes, Mercedes, foreign travel and, of course, money for their temples.

Radical monks oppose Western "consumerism" and link the importation of consumer goods to the privatization of industry, the free-trade zones and the expansion of tourism. They decry that traditional farmers are turned into an underemployed proletariat toiling for multinational food producers, that the world market destroys the local economy, that world powers deprive so many of the world's peoples of their most fundamental right: the right to life which is daily taken in imperialist wars. In today's Orwellian world, the West's

⁹ Tambiah, 92-4

promulgation of “human rights” justifies the taking the thousands of lives from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan; “democracy” hides the rule of an economic elite; and “liberalization” lubricates the penetration of giant corporations and banks into the daily lives of people all over the world.

If Buddhism is for many people a cultural shift from colonialism, for many women it is also a liberating force since female monks (*bikkhunis*) can find liberation in the monasteries from both the drudgery of kitchen work and patriarchal subservience to husbands and fathers they were compelled to accept.¹⁰

In the poem of one *bikkhunis*, Vikkhuni Muttu, we hear celebration:

So free am I, so gloriously free,
Free from three petty things –
From mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord,
Freed from rebirth and death I am,
And all that was has held me down
Is hurled away.

Ancient assemblies of all monks were frequently held to settle disputes inquire into breaches of rules and to ordain new monks. Without any central power, local communities of monks made decisions together, in discussions in which all monks were equal. Living on all and sharing what they collected, monks lived in a form of communal—or even “communist”—equality in monasteries with a minimum of personal property.¹¹ Even today, each Buddhist temple enjoys relative autonomy, and many practice direct democratic deliberation.

Many monks have compared this Buddhist past to the desired ends of the Russian Revolution. They quoted *The Agganna Sutta*, which taught that: “The source of political authority lies in the collective consent of the people.” The *Cakkavatti Sihananda Sutta* tells us that “the immediate cause of social upheaval or revolution seems to be the mode of distribution, that is, the inequitable distribution of wealth and the accumulation of wealth in the

¹⁰ Selvy Thiruchandran, *Women's Movement in Sri Lanka: History, Trends and Trajectories* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2012) 5-6

¹¹ Tambiah, 114

hands of a few on the one hand and increasing poverty of the majority on the other."¹²

Is it therefore any wonder when Buddhists criticize Western-style democracy and see it as a system that promotes corruption and injustice? Monks themselves have elaborated a model for Buddhist democracy. Gnanasiha has proposed revitalizing the ancient Council of 7000 with members drawn from village councils. Other models of representational systems for a Buddhist administered society have also been concretely suggested.

As guardians of the religion of Kandyan society, Buddhist monks were closely linked with the aristocracy, district leaders, and all Sinhalese people. The relationship of *bikkhus* to their villages must be understood in the context of the monk as teacher of languages (Pali included), of Buddhism, of meditation, and of ayurvedic medicine. Monks developed enormous capacities for memorization with which to convey messages, and their sermons openly promoted sedition. With no property, descendants and household ties, monks were part of an anti-colonial "counterculture" that became a vital source of rebellion.

As early as the Dutch occupation, monks were in the forefront of the 1760 revolt. In 1772 and 1798, Buddhist monks of three low-caste coastal communities (fisher or *Karawa*, cinnamon workers or *Salalgama*, and *Durawa*) organized festivals without the approval of the high-caste Buddhist hierarchy based in the autonomous kingdom of Kandy. But in 1803, when they sought to organize a third festival, the British governor prohibited it, seeking to maintain close ties to the Kandian upper-caste with whom they would build an alliance to overthrow the king. When cinnamon workers threatened an island-wide strike, the British governor withdrew his order, an important victory for low-caste Buddhists. Soon thereafter, when high-caste Buddhists sought to partition separate areas within temples, lower-caste Buddhists organized autonomous temples. As a network of new temples expanded, their monks sought to overcome restrictions that privileged higher ordination to the upper (*Goyigama*) caste.

¹² Tambiah, 109.

At the beginning of the 19th century, British Governor Brownrigg (conqueror of Kandy) complained about the Buddhists: “their own Councils are secret, their emissaries numerous and their access and means great. It is hard to fathom their true sentiments being by habit and education deep and artful disassemblers.”

The British conquest of the entire island dealt a severe blow to Buddhism, and monks (especially from the coastal areas) played an active role in every revolt between 1816 and 1848.¹³ Their primary concern was to restore the Kandyan kingdom and Buddhism as the established religion. Although British propaganda has celebrated the capture and exile of the last Sri Lankan king, much evidence has been recently forthcoming of the widespread opposition to the British, including among the island’s traditional aristocracy, claimed by the British to have been the moving force behind the king’s demise.¹⁴

Under the British, road building on the island became a major endeavor. British governor Torrington demanded that every male work six days per year on roads or pay the government a sum of money, accelerating indigenous resentment of foreign colonialism. When the island's coffee plantations became barren, the rebellion of 1848 swept the island. From the Kandyan highlands to the Maritime Provinces, the revolt included the city of Colombo for the first time.

Expansionist British imperialism was also opposed at that time in the Punjab. Sri Lankans were aware of the uprisings in India as well as around the world in 1848, year of world-historical social movements. One British observer noted that: “intelligence from Europe arrived of the revolution in France... and the disturbances in other European countries...and almost simultaneously with that there arrived intelligence of disasters to our Army in India... I am assured by intelligent Kandyans that those two circumstances had a very material affect on the minds of the Kandyans... and improper use of those circumstances was made by the local press.”¹⁵

¹³ Kumari Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment: Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 2010) 113-116

¹⁴ *ibid*, 116

¹⁵ Emerson Tennent as quoted in *Perpetual Ferment*, 144

For the first time, the 1848 united rural protests with the urban intelligentsia, including the ascendant rich among the indigenous population. Although the revolt was mercilessly crushed, the system of compulsory labor was brought to an end and the governor was recalled to England. The controversial poll tax levied on monks was also withdrawn. Two years after the revolt, *Young Ceylon* began to be published by radical Euro-Asians who had been active in 1848.

Christian missionaries harshly criticized Buddhism, asking in an 1862 pamphlet: “Has Buddhism helped you and your ancestors in any way to raise yourself from your foolishness and ignorance?” So offensive was Christian propaganda that even British governor Warren worried that “the language they use is violent and offensive that it might provoke and disturb the entire populace.”¹⁶ Hundreds of thousands of copies of the Bible and Christian pamphlets were freely distributed among the people, at the same time as indigenous publications were suppressed. So great was Christian arrogance that Wesleyan priests publicly challenged traditional healers (*kattadiyas*) to a series of public debates, a challenge no one immediately accepted. After continual provocations, Buddhist monks finally agreed to engage in a public exchange. On February 8, 1865 the first face-to-face debate occurred. In attendance were some 2000 Buddhists and 70 Christians. Pastor George Parsons recalled that “...never before in Ceylon was there such a marshaling of the enemy against Christianity.” After a series of inconclusive events, the fifth and final debate took place in August 1873. Witnessed by thousands, the Panadura debate was an historic event in which the Christian missionary movement suffered an ignoble defeat. In its aftermath, the Buddhist revival movement would go from victory to victory.

While inter-caste rivalries among Buddhists continued to weaken the movement, a foreigner, American theosophist Henry Steele Olcott, became the leader for most of a decade of the Buddhist renaissance. So great was Olcott’s influence that a leading monk named him “Asoka the Second.” After Catholics attacked a Buddhist procession in 1883, it was Olcott who was dispatched as representative of a Buddhist security committee to meet the colonial secretary in London. Ceylon’s British authorities had failed to act properly in defense of indigenous people. When the British government responded positively to Olcott, the Buddhist reawakening flourished: Buddhist Dharma schools and a Young Men’s Buddhist Association were founded, and *Vesak* (a celebration of

¹⁶ Ivan, *Revolt in the Temple*, 90

Buddha's birth, life and death) was made a public holiday. Olcott scandalously left the island with his financial dealings in question, but his influence was undoubtedly an important boost to the Buddhist revival.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the island's Legislative Council only included Anglican Christians and upper-caste *Goyigamas*. Repeated campaigns to open the political system failed to produce meaningful reforms. Initiated by the fisher caste, the Ceylon Planters' Association, which later changed its name to the Ceylon National Congress (CNC), won limited constitutional reform in 1910 (by royal decree), opening the ranks of representation, but on the basis of race. Moreover, universal franchise was won in 1931, as was limited autonomy administered by elected 61-member State Council. In the words of Dayan Jayatilleka, the CNC "was the most representative political formation ever seen in this country; never-preceded, never to be followed. It was a rainbow coalition; multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multicultural, multi-caste."¹⁷

Because fisher stood outside the feudal bondage to the land imposed by indigenous and colonial powers, they became a leading force in anti-caste and anti-colonial struggles. As often occurs, social movement partisans and activists develop skill sets that brought them into advantage positions within the existing system. By the end of the 19th century, individuals from the fisher caste were the majority of the most affluent and powerful islanders.¹⁸

Besides reformist tendencies, an anti-imperialist dimension led by Anagarika Dharmapala (formerly David Hewawitharana) emerged within the movement. Dharmapala castigated Sinhalese for eating beef, for imitating Western habits, for taking Western names, and for their subservience to the English. Scion of a high-caste, wealthy family, he advocated beating foreigners whenever they could be found. When colonialists could not be found, he counseled families to make effigies dressed in trousers and Western clothing in front of their homes—and to beat them in the presence of their children. The temperance movement he organized has been called the "first ever organized people's mass movement in Ceylon."¹⁹ The country's educated youth, children of the

¹⁷ Dayan Jayatilleka, *Long War, Cold Peace: Sri Lanka's North-South Crisis* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2014) 10

¹⁸ Ivan, *Revolt in the Temple*, 83

¹⁹ Ivan, *Revolt in the Temple*, 131

new socially elite, took to the countryside to spread the temperance movement. By 1915, 220 village councils with more than 24,000 members had been established. After the colonial government decided to open 1072 new toddy taverns, the movement took on an increasingly anti-British tone.

Although Dharmapala's influence is commonly dubbed "Protestant Buddhism," he is more akin to young Malcolm X in his opposition to "alien" habits and vices, in his shaming of Sinhalese to change themselves, and in his militant opposition. In 1912, a journal run by Dharmapala lamented, "from the day the foreign white man stepped in this country, the industries, habits, and customs of the Sinhalese began to disappear and now the Sinhalese are obliged to fall at the feet of the Coast Moors and Tamils."

In Kandy on May 29, 1915, a Buddhist procession passing a mosque was attacked during the *Vesak* festival, and several people were killed. Rioting spread all over the country, thousands of shops were looted, at least 17 mosques were set on fire and 86 more damaged. The colonial government blamed it on Buddhists, and filed 9600 cases in police courts, nearly all of which were against Buddhists. Before order had been restored, at least 64 people were shot dead and 189 others injured. Anti-British sentiment became so widespread that the first steps were taken to form a national movement uniting Sinhalese and Tamils to overthrow colonial rule.

Without any expression of remorse for the dozens of killed and hundreds of injured, Dharmapala complained in a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies dated June 15, 1915: "The Muhammadans, an alien people who in the early part of the 19th century were common traders, by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese, sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2,358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country from alien invaders...today... are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds." Dharmapala was subsequently imprisoned and tortured by the British after he moved to Calcutta. He returned to Ceylon at least twice, but his influence waned as a new generation came to the fore.

Class Struggle

Dharmapala's meteoric effect on people may appear to have been short-lived, but after his departure from Ceylon, the end of British rule was a fait accompli. The violence of Sinhalese nationalism in 1915, often understood as having

been led by businessmen who were direct competitors with Muslim shopkeepers and commercial interests, also led to the emergence of a working-class movement that united all ethnicities. Monks played an active role in this development. As early as the general strike of 1923, the harbor strike of 1927, and the tramway strike of 1929, *bikkhus* spoke at strike meetings and supported progressive trade unions.

Grassroots motion among workers led to the formation of two parties in 1935, the *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (LSSP—literally Lanka Equal Society Party, an anti-colonial Marxist party) and the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC), which propagated Sinhalese ethnicity, religion and language. Both these parties were vital to the movement to expel the British and bring justice to the poor as World War 2 ended. Workers in Colombo mobilized to secure badly needed trade union rights, higher wages, and improvements in working conditions. There was an island-wide bus strike toward the end of the war; a general strike led by government workers in October 1945; and a second general strike in the middle of 1947 included government white-collar employees. The entire country seemed to rally against the Soulbury Constitution imposed by the British, and in elections in 1947, the Left made spectacular gains.

But even before the end of the war, the Indian proletariat, through a massive “spontaneous” anti-colonial uprising in August 1942, affirmed their desire and need for independence and autonomy. From Delhi and Mumbai to the rural south, millions of urban and rural workers rose up, regardless of whether Hindu or Moslem. Little states emerged in villages that expelled the British and established forms of self-government. After traitors were sternly punished, villagers displayed public their “merriment” through celebrations.

For LSSP member Hector Abhayavardhana, then in exile in India, the lesson of these strikes was the “historical necessity of the party of the Indian proletariat.”²⁰ Actually, that view, so common on the Left, refuses to recognize the capability of assembled people to rule themselves. Instead of key activists empowering and facilitating people to rule themselves, they write about the need for an elite party. What genuine revolution demands is the capacity of masses of ordinary people to govern themselves, to recognize in their uprisings their power to rule democratically without any elite.

²⁰ Hector Abhayavardhana, *Selected Writings* (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 2001) 19

Abhayavardhana was indignant that celebrating villagers “could not guess” that British troops would return. It seems to me another interpretation is possible. In their wisdom people knew they could not defeat the British militarily. Their long-repressed capacity for celebration was rooted deep in their psyche, and releasing their erotic joy in moments of liberation strengthens their resolve and prepares them for future struggles. Revolution is as much a process of enhancing and releasing this pent-up energy as riding it, as a cowboy would ride a horse. Soon enough, Left vanguard parties would have their moments in Sri Lankan history—the first time, in 1953, as farce; the second, in 1971, as tragedy.

While Left historians emphasize the role of “vanguard” parties in this period, monks were also a significant force. In the 1940s, the Vidyalkankara group of monks advocated the responsibility and right of monks to take political action. When the ACBC opposed political engagement of monks, radical monks formed the Ceylon Union of Bikkhus and openly called for a socialist program and nationalization of minds transportation and large estates, control of foreign investments, and free education. Scholar-monks began to agitate for the fusion of religion and government. As a unified force, they declared on February 13, 1946: "The divorce of religion from the nation was an idea introduced into the minds of Sinhalese by invaders from the West who belonged to an alien faith. It was a convenient instrument of astute policy to enable them to keep the people in subjugation in order to rule them as they pleased."²¹

Two hundred political monks took part in a mass meeting in Colombo during the general strike of 1946, when thousands of workers in key sectors—railroad, transport, harbor workers, gas workers, and many others called for total independence (with out economic restrictions) and for “British Quit Our Bases!” and “Hands off Egypt” and “Ceylon Must Leave the Commonwealth” read their picket signs. This same group supported the general strike the following year. Syncing the two legitimate their involvement in politics, Walpola Rahula recalled that monks had marched to war with Dutthagamani and were leaders of uprisings against the Dutch in 1760 and British in 1818, 1834, and 1848. Prominent monks were active in the general strike of 1923, the harbor strike of 1927 and the tramways strike of 1929. One prominent

²¹ Ivan, *Revolt in the Temple*, 165

monk, Gnanasiha, was significantly involved in the unsuccessful coup d'état of 1964. Sentenced to prison, his advocacy of Buddhist nationalism and socialism became widely known. He taught that parliamentary democracy appears to be a garland of flowers but is in actuality a circular saw that cuts the neck. In light of the experience of the early 21st century, his insight that the parliamentary system promotes bad behavior and destroys the right of the people is difficult to refute. In 1947, monks openly supported the general strike led by the LSSP.

The role of monks in these political movements is controversial. In his book *The Heritage of the Bikkhu*, Rahula considered past beliefs that “even killing people in order to liberate the religion in the country was not a heinous crime.”²² Harvard professor Stanley Tambiah dismisses monks as an appropriate political alternative to corrupt politicians. Tambiah believes that monks have made no “demonstration of their mastery of political, economic, and administrative skills and knowledge which would enable them to be effective politicians...in a society facing modern challenges and tasks.”²³

²² Tambiah, 28

²³ Tambiah, 122

The 1953 Hartal

Unlike India, where a vibrant movement compelled the British to leave, Ceylon emerged as an autonomous state in the global context of decolonization, not as a direct result of an indigenous movement that had to be placated. The newly independent state was left with an export-oriented economy imposed by Great Britain. With the end of the Korean War in 1953 (during which prices of the island's products had boomed), prices of Sri Lanka's main exports—tea and rubber—plummeted, while the cost of imported rice rose.

Afloat in an international system that dwarfed it, Ceylon had little choice but to look to the world institutions like the IMF and World Bank for help. Faced with an economic crisis it could not resolve, the elected UNP government broke its campaign promises by ending the food subsidy and imposing drastic price rises for sugar and rice (from 25 to 70 cents per measure). When the opposition called for fresh elections, Minister of Finance JR Jayawardena insisted that the price rise was mandated by the IMF and World Bank, and although unpopular, was therefore a necessity. The autocratic leaders of the UNP would not hear of fresh elections. In response, a broad protest movement emerged that united the entire country, from the Tamil north to the Sinhalese south.

Island people are affected by streams flowing from all parts of the world, and Sri Lankans are no exception. Since independence, they have been especially impressed by world revolutions. "Socialism" is so much a part of political discourse and popular will that the country's official name is "Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka." Along with the Cuban revolution's inspiration, movements in Vietnam, China and Russia have been admired and emulated.

Trotskyism in the LSSP was so entrenched, when the inevitable split with Stalinism transpired, the Stalinists were expelled and formed the Communist Party (CPSL). The LSSP was far bigger and more popular than the CPSL. Both believed in the working class and rural proletariat as the agents of social change, but when the moment came for the LSSP to act decisively during the hartal of 1953, it utterly failed to lead. (A successful hartal is a general strike and much more—transportation stops, businesses close, and even automobile traffic comes to a standstill. A hartal is bigger than a strike since it includes workers' actions but also extends protests to all facets of public life.)

History sometimes present unique opportunities that may never appear again. The 1953 hartal was such a moment. Although no one could have guessed it at the time, it would be the last time that the island's various ethnicities would unite in action against a common enemy. All the people of the island—Tamils in the north, Sinhalese, Muslims and even many Burghers—took to the streets on August 12. So afraid of the mobilized citizenry was the Brown British UNP government, they scurried off shore to the HMS Newfoundland, a British warship in Colombo harbor. Meeting as the island's future hung in the balance, they declared the country under Emergency Regulations (the equivalent of martial law) and used naked force—the more visible the better—to restore order.

As early as July 21, the day after the price of food rose, men and women in the village of Randombe, lay down on public roads to block traffic in protest. Police were unable to disperse them because women in particular were militantly defiant. Randombe's exemplary action spread the next day to four nearby villages and a total of nine villages by July 24. On July 23 as protests mounted across the country, all opposition parties rallied at Galle Face Green (Colombo's beachfront park adjoining the traditional set of government). LSSP leader N.M. Perera addressed a packed crowd of more than 50,000. After he called for an island wide hartal from midnight on August 11th to midnight on the 12th, police attacked with batons and tear gas. Remarkably people fought back, an indication of the country's mood. Because they had led the crowd in standing up to the police and convening their meeting despite the state violence, the LSSP considered the rally a turning point in Ceylon's history.²⁴

The promise of the moment was enormous. The LSSP was a socially legitimate alternative to the corrupt and inefficient post-colonial government, and their proletarian ideology united all castes, ethnicities and subaltern constituencies. Furthermore, the decision of the SLFP not to participate left the field open for the LSSP to take decisive action. They had more than two weeks to prepare.

The night before the hartal was to begin, students at Peradeniya University in Kandy clashed with police, and although many were arrested, they faced police baton charges without running away. As morning broke a contingent of monks began a fast at town hall. Trains stopped running. All over the country,

²⁴ Wesley S. Muthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe, *We Were Making History: Saga of the Hartal of 1953* (Colombo: Young Socialist: 2002) 175

people acted: dock workers closed the harbors, cinemas closed, buses did not run, textile workers and miners all stopped work. People barricaded roads by cutting down trees and telephone poles, and when police attacked people fought back with stones, clubs, whatever they could find. Everywhere, people made sure transport stopped. In some places, small bridges were dynamited and others dismantled telephone and telegraph wires were cut in many places compelling the government to rely on radio or communication. White-collar workers were reluctant to wear black armbands and strike on August 12, but most could not get to work since transportation was on strike and streets were blockaded.

For the first time in the island's history workers united with peasants against capitalism and brought the country to a standstill. More than 100,000 people participated actively in the strike. At least 30,000 plantation workers had stopped work, and barricades were constructed on many roads to stop all traffic. Women were especially active in public space.

Faced with a nationwide work stoppage, the government panicked and abandoned the country for the day of the hartal. The cabinet of ministers retreated to the HMS Newfoundland, from where they issued a State of National Emergency and declared a curfew in the western and Southern provinces. By the time the turmoil was ended, some 30 people had been killed and several hundred wounded. Of the 500 people arrested, 450 of them were members or affiliates of LSSP. No doubt but that the government listened when the party's special newspaper of August 12 had called for the hartal to "immediately and unconditionally to down the capitalist UNP government!"

Writing a month after the hartal, LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva noted that "the movement also reached the proportions and level of a veritable mass uprising in the 24 divisions of the Western, Southern, and Sabaragamuwa provinces in which the emergency regulations were longest maintained... Every province of the island saw whole sections of the people participate in the protest march in one form or another; saw strikes and demonstrations, transport paralyzed and shops closed; saw meetings of protests and black flags up. The Jaffna Peninsula in particular saw this on the widest possible scale on August 12..."²⁵

²⁵ Colvin R. de Silva, "Hartal!" (Colombo: Lanka Samasamaja Publications, 1953)

The Colombo Municipal Council supported the hartal and called upon the government to resign. JR Jayawardena resigned as Finance Minister as did the Prime Minister. Even the mayor of Colombo resigned.

LSSP leader Edmund Samarakkody believed the party suffered a failure of nerve: "What the working class and the masses that were in the struggle looked forward to was not a mere one-day protest action and a return to work the following day. They were in readiness for a struggle to overthrow the hated UNP government. There were clear possibilities of this Hartal action being continued for several days thereafter."²⁶

But instead of overthrowing the government, the LSSP equivocated. "There was no attempt to prepare a revolutionary onslaught on the state and a seizure of state power by the masses... The workers staged a general strike and were supported by the masses in the rural areas that had occupation of the streets. But the LSSP leaders had no wish to do more than stage a one-day general strike. The masses were ready to go on, but the leaders betrayed them and called off the strike after 24 hours."²⁷

The failure of the LSSP, a party whose leadership had endured torturous imprisonment and staged daring escapes, an organization composed of the cream of post independence Sri Lankan intelligentsia, called off the protests at a moment when the broad masses of the people in cities and in the countryside had risen against the system.

LSSP leader N. M. Perera disowned responsibility for actions after the one-day hartal, and stated that it was the responsibility of the government to restore order – a task for which he extended the support of the LSSP. A government counter defense counter offensive took place and the martial law experience of 1915 was repeated. The police originally released a figure of 21 deaths by shooting and then lowered it to seven. Print shops were raided, hundreds of people who broke the curfew were arrested, and beatings became commonplace as the state used its iron fist to consolidate control.

Counterrevolution

²⁶ Edmund Samarakkody, "1953: A Missed opportunity," in *We Were Making History*, 509

²⁷ Abhayavardhana, 242

By abandoning the hartal after only one day, the LSSE—like nearly all CP's after World War 2—betrayed the popular insurgency. The united power of the people was forever impossible after the failure of 1953. Old Left parties, including both the LSSP and CP, provided no hope for Tamils. The 1953 hartal was the last chance for unified ethnic opposition to the rule of capital. After missing the moment for the realization of their revolutionary ambitions, the LSSP degenerated into loyal opposition.

The movement of history sometimes provide clear divisions into periods, and in the case of the 1953 hartal, when the opportunity to overthrow the comprador elite was at hand, the Old Left's apex and fall from grace were evident. As has occurred in much of the world, once Old Left parties demonstrated through action—or better said, lack thereof—their allegiance to the system, they were incorporated into its wings as reformist elements in order to contain any potentially dangerous social explosions.

The radical Buddhist impulse fared little better. Rather than locating an earthly nirvana in a society at peace with itself, the postcolonial Buddhist revival played a central role in Sinhalese ethnocentrism on an island divided by language, religion, caste, and class. After the hartal, to commemorate 2500 years after the death of Buddha as well as the arrival of the first Sinhalese on the island, a Buddhist commission of inquiry published a report, "The Betrayal of Buddhism," in which Sinhala Buddhism was understood as being continually under threat and overrun by external forces—whether Tamil invaders or Western colonialists. That year the United Front of the Monks, led by the radical monks of the 1940s, publicly called upon Buddhists to vote in the elections of 1956 in order to make Sinhalese the island's official language and to implement democratic socialism.

Those Buddhist monks who had legitimated the right and responsibility of monks to engage in politics saw the fruits of their labor in the elections of 1956, when the power of the activist *Sangha* swept Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) leader S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike into the presidency. After his SLFP won a landslide victory in elections that year, some called it the "revolution of 1956"—and others labeled the defeat of the "Brown British," as the UNP was reduced to a paltry 8 seats, less than one-tenth of parliament. In newly independent Ceylon, Bandaranaike had himself emerged from the currents of Buddhist revivalism. He adopted the Sinhala-only language policy long advocated by Buddhist extremists. Traditionally, Lankans were of fairly equal

income. Almost everyone participated in farming communally. Money was rare, and the King owned all land. As transmitted to post-colonial Ceylon, the ideal symbols of Sinhalese culture are a community comprised by the temple (*dagaba*), paddy field (*yaya*) and water tanks (*vava*). Propagated in novels, songs, television dramas, and literature, political parties embraced these symbols, turning them into powerful unconscious forces. Bandaranaika embraced the five principal groups of society as the monk, the vernacular teacher, the farmer, the ayurvedic healer and the worker.

The 1956 declaration of Sinhala as the island's only official language thrust down all Tamils to second-class citizenship. Almost immediately, the contentious issue of newly independent Ceylon's official language sparked confrontations between Tamils and Sinhalese. On June 5, 1956 about 300 respected Tamils led by S.J.C. Chelvanayakam initiated a peaceful sit-in near parliament when the Sinhala-only bill was being debated. Within an hour, several hundred Sinhalese led by saffron-robed monks arrived and began to beat them. Soon anti-Tamil violence spread from Colombo, and in the ensuing riots, some 150 people were killed. Although Prime Minister Bandaranaika and Chelvanayakam came to agreement on regional councils as a means to give Tamil some autonomy, prolonged and intense Sinhalese opposition led by JR compelled Bandaranaika in May 1958 to forego any compromise. As ethnic violence continued to plague the country, the prime minister sought to legalize a "reasonable use of Tamil." In the eyes of Buddhist chauvinists, Bandaranaika's "betrayal" was unforgivable, and he was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in 1959. Although no one knew it at the time, the stage was set for a bloody civil war.

In elections the next year, Bandaranaika's wife Sirima led her late husband's SLFP to victory. The UNP won more votes, but the SLFP's socialist platform, in a coalition with Marxist parties, won them control of parliament. In 1960, Sirima became the first female prime minister in the world, and one of her first actions was to implement the Buddhist commission of inquiry's call for the government to take control of schools, "to free education from the stronghold of the missionaries." In 1961, some 2,649 schools were nationalized, bringing to a close Christian domination of education. By raising the aspirations of hundreds of thousands of previously marginalized Buddhist youth in the Sinhalese heartland, the SFLP unwittingly laid the groundwork for a new insurrection.

Top-down state “socialism” could not invigorate the economy nor animate massive support. In elections in 1965, the UNP defeated the SLFP. With the party of the rich back in power, Left parties, having abandoned their multi-ethnic position on an official language, walked out of Parliament to protest the Tamil Language Bill when it was being debated. Together with SLFP leader Sirima Bandaranaike, they staged a *satyagraha* (a non-violent protest literally meaning “gripped by the truth”) on January 8, 1966 at the statue of Viharamahadevi (the mother of Dutthagamani). Marching in the lead with them to Galle Face Green was the *Maha Sangha* (the monastic community of ordained monks and nuns). They were blocked by police, and in the ensuing conflict, one monk was killed. While the UNP government fell soon thereafter, the utter bankruptcy of established Old Left parties to provide leadership in 1953 permanently disillusioned masses of people and delegitimized the LSSP as a revolutionary party—providing the subjective conditions for the emergence of a New Left two decades later. In 1971, a New Left party emerged that made the opposite error—an adventurist attempt to seize power through a clandestine armed insurrection without real popular mobilization or support. New Left groups emerged in the 1960s as mainly youthful rural activists with a strong southern base consolidated their groups in the expanding educational system.

Once the British had been expelled, Sri Lanka's population nearly doubled in the 25 years from 1946 to 1971, rising from 6.6 million to 12.5 million. Life expectancy rose from 43 in 1946 to 66 in 1971. In the same period, the number of youths (14 and younger) nearly doubled from 2.5 to nearly 5 million. Some two-thirds of the population, more than 8 million people, was under the age of 35. Despite a literacy rate of 80%, per capita income in 1971 averaged only \$132. The country's foreign debt had risen 600% from 1955 to 1969, and the United Front “socialist” government that came to power in 1970—comprised of the SLFP, the LSSP, and CPSL—pleaded with the World Bank to grant further loans to pay for essential food imports. The World Bank demanded austerity measures: elimination of the rice subsidy, a wage freeze, and cutbacks in social services.

Emergence of the New Left: The JVP

The global bankruptcy of Communist Parties became everywhere apparent to the generation of youthful revolutionaries that emerged all over the world in 1968. Communist Parties betrayed or opposed revolutionary movements in France in May 1968 and in Italy over the next decade, but their irrelevance to

revolution was evident as early as the Cuban revolution of 1959—to say nothing about the workers’ uprisings in Berlin in 1953 and Poland in 1956.

The currents of world revolution in 1968 merged into a veritable torrent of international insurgencies—a “world-historical period of struggle” that profoundly imprinted future movements with their birthmarks.²⁸ Sri Lankans were well aware of world events in this period. From the Tet offensive to Polisario solidarity, the island was infused with internationalist sentiment. Activists read Che, Debray, and Marcuse; Brecht plays were performed. Although not well known, Sri Lanka's movement has been called by K.M. de Silva “the biggest revolt of young people in any part of the world in recorded history, the first instance of tension between generations becoming a military conflict on a national scale.”

Of all youthful activists in Lanka, no party was more important than the JVP, *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* or People’s Liberation Front) in which no one distinguished themselves more than Rohana Wijeweera. Although in 1971, many people such as Martin Wickremasinghe believed Sri Lanka could not have a revolution as in Vietnam or China because the country’s people abhorred violence, Wijeweera would lead two armed insurrections against the government, bloody failures in which tens of thousands of people lost their lives. His nom de guerre “Rohana” was the ancient name for the Deep South—stronghold of Buddhist resistance to Tamil conquerors. By using it, Wijeweera linked the JVP to King Dutthagamani’s patriotic fight against Tamil King Elara. Son of a respected Communist, Wijeweera was awarded a full scholarship to study medicine in Moscow. As a teenager, he showed signs of audacity to his Russian hosts by openly embracing Maoism.

Formed in 1967, the JVP was the penultimate product of the streams of world revolution that flowed onto the island’s shores. In the pantheon of revolutionary heroes displayed at JVP public meetings, Mao, Lenin and Che mixed together with Sinhala flags and images of Sinhalese patriot Anagarika Dharmapala. “Motherland” was at the center of JVP ideology both in 1971 and 1987.

²⁸ See my book, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987)

Although committed to principles of democratic centralism, the JVP's internal democracy was practically nonexistent. No leaders were elected and orders passed from top to bottom. In January 1971, Wijeweera unilaterally named himself General Secretary for the first time at a press conference in response to a reporter's question in what capacity he spoke for the JVP. Moreover, a patriarchal division of labor limited the practice of females. Only a few women received military training, while the majority of female recruits were trained in first aid, used as spies, couriers and propagandists. There were no women in the Politburo, although there were often female leaders at a district level.

Wijeweera distinguished himself in many ways: he developed and taught the famous five lectures in which the purpose and tasks of the revolution were enumerated; he personally trained the 500 full-time activists who also gave the lectures, so his thoughts were paramount; he perfected the technique of hanging the same poster island-wide in a single night. Many of his youthful followers, having been educated only in Sinhalese, blindly accepted Wijeweera's accounts of foreign struggles such as his conclusion that massive killings in Indonesia in 1965 and the overthrow of Allende in Chile in 1973 meant that a peaceful transition to socialism was impossible. One fawning description of Wijeweera explained: "if Che Guevarism can be termed as Marxism adopted to the Cuban conditions, then 'Wijeweerism' is Marxism adapted to Sri Lanka conditions."²⁹

As time went on, the JVP became known as *Che Kallinya* or *Che Guaras*—the "Che group," and their 1971 insurrection became internationally prominent as the Che Guevara Uprising. While Che's foco theory, popularized through the work of Regis Debray, was known, it appears the New Left in Lanka formed because of the reformist Old Left's obstinate opposition to emergent aspirations of youth. Not only was there little chance for young people to join and advance within the hierarchy of Old Left parties, these organizations had little to do with revolution (as we have seen in reference to the 1953 hartal). In the 1940s and 1950s, violent confrontations between Trotskyists and Stalinists were not uncommon—a precedent followed by the JVP decades later, although the JVP's murderous attacks were on a scale that they should be called a paradigmatic shift.³⁰

²⁹ Chandraprema, 73

³⁰ Interview with Nirmal Dewasiri, March 11, 2014

The JVP's program called for "a fully planned socialist economic structure, abolition of the existing capitalist economy, nationalization of industries, banks and land; tearing up existing debt due to imperialist banks; land reform collective farms, and setting up of cooperatives. They promised to disband the army and the police and replace them with people's militia, to abolish the capitalist judicial system and replace it with people's courts. With their radical program, the JVP won over many people and became far more popular than all other left parties combined.

Wijeweera stemmed from a low-caste fisher family, and he never hesitated to favor others from his caste and region. Very often, because of their oppressive conditions of life, people from the oppressed castes sympathized with the JVP. That is a great advantage compared to the two major political parties, whose leadership comes from a vastly wealthier milieu than its voters. The JVP leadership and members stemmed from the same social backgrounds even if the leaders had the advantages of higher education. They were sensitive to the needs of rural youth, many of whom pressed the government to establish means for poor peasant children to be consulted on their future.

Within the JVP fighting units, those from the most oppressed castes were best armed because of their "primordial loyalty."³¹ Those deemed disloyal or worse were expelled or killed, leading people to describe the JVP as a vast crowded hall with 2 doors—one entrance and one exit.

The JVP's preference for recruiting the most oppressed resulted in attracting lumpenproletariat ("*yakko*") into their ranks. Party leaders could order assassinations that teams of *yakko*'s would carry out without question. Charges have been made that robberies and murders were often committed for personal gain. Premadasa insists: "The downfall of the JVP can in large measure be ascribed to the activity of these lumpen elements."³² Certainly, the JVP employed gangsters to carry out selected killings, as was apparently the case with Independent Student Union (ISU) leader Daya Pathirana's murder by criminals from Piliyandala.³³

Sri Lanka's fragile government narrowly avoided a military coup in 1962, when progressive army officers and high-ranking Buddhist monks...

³¹ Premadasa, 131.

³² Premadasa 170

³³ Premadasa, 190

The JVP viewed “Indian expansionism” as successor to British colonization, and Indian capital was using Tamils to subjugate Sri Lanka. In 1971, British owned tea plantations where nearly a quarter million Tamils labored became a point of contestation between the JVP and the government period. Moreover, when the rest of the country appeared to have forgotten about the IMF and WB, the JVP opposed “any submission to imperialism.”³⁴

Progressives in Sri Lanka had only recently elected the United Left Front government in May 1970. People's high expectations were focused on the parliamentary success of the left, and popular expectations were to work through the parliamentary system, not to overthrow it. Nevertheless, at a meeting of the JVP politburo in September 1970, those present resolved to undertake the armed overthrow of the United Front government. Every member of the party, numbering in 1970 about 23,000 people organized into cells of 5, was mandated to obtain one gun and 10 bullets, leading to an unprecedented series of gun thefts in which, as intelligence services noted, a clear pattern emerged.³⁵ In nearly every robbery, only guns and ammunition were taken; nothing else was removed from the crime scenes.

In preparation for the uprising, bomb-making factories were set up, and large quantities of empty condensed milk cans, slated to be made into grenades, were assembled across the country. Long lists of “counter revolutionaries” were drawn up and orders issued to kill them after power had been seized. Bank robberies and mailbag thefts brought substantial funds into party coffers, as did collections of money from tens of thousands of people who attended JVP public rallies. On February 27, 1971, Wijeweera spoke for over three hours at Hyde Park in Colombo, the last of public meeting before the insurrection.

On March 6, a policeman was killed during a demonstration outside the United States Embassy in Colombo when a small groupuscule, the “Mao Youth Front,” that launched an attack. The state mistakenly publicized a JVP attempt to “overthrow the government” and declared a state of emergency, including a 24-hour curfew. Optimistically calling for success of the revolution of workers farmers and soldiers, Wijeweera was traversing the country until he was

³⁴ Interview with Vikramabahu Kartunaratna, March 14, 2014.

³⁵ Michael Colin Cooke, 128.

arrested on March 13 and imprisoned in Jaffna. By April 2, some 4,098 JVPers had been arrested, leading the JVP to fear another massacre of communists on the scale of Indonesia in 1965, when as many as two million people were killed.

The JVP had many contacts inside the military, and as the country went into the state of emergency, suspected JVP members were taken into custody. The air force's entire rugby team was rounded up for close links with the JVP. The JVP claimed that some 40% of the armed services sympathized with them, but this assertion is in all likelihood grossly exaggerated.³⁶ Another gauge of the JVP's strength was that its newspaper debuted on August 1, 1970 and sold over 70,000 per issue by the end of the year.³⁷

Meeting at a Buddhist monks' residence hall outside Colombo on April 2, members of the party inner circle resolved to launch synchronized assaults on police stations at 11:30 PM on the night of April 5. It was also decided to send teams to Colombo to capture the Prime Minister and take over the city, as well as to Jaffna to free Wijeweera.

At midnight on April 5, 1971, armed JVP militants simultaneously attacked 74 police stations across the country.³⁸ They captured five stations, but more importantly, captured large swaths of the countryside. Prins Gunasekara gives a feel for the moment: "With a few hundred handmade single barrel shotguns and a few thousands of crude firebombs and hand grenades packed in discarded condensed milk cans, the JVP launched their one-day revolution on 5 April 1971."³⁹

The police had been placed on high alert because of one group of insurgents' premature assault on the police in Wellawaya at 5 am that morning—18½ hours ahead of time. The cryptic telegram that had informed activists of the impending moment for attack read, "JVP Appuhamy expired, funeral 5." The

³⁶ Premadasa, 185

³⁷ Alles, 52

³⁸ Godahewa Indradasa, *Failed Revolts in Sri Lanka (1971 and 1987-1989): Indepth Analysis of an Intelligence Officer* (Moratuwa: Opro Publishing, 2012). Victor Ivan, *Paradise* says 93 of 273, damaging 57. Prins Gunasekara says 92.

³⁹ Prins Gunasekara, *A Lost Generation: The Untold Story* (Colombo: Chatter Printing Works, 1998) 6

message had apparently been misinterpreted. “Appuhamy” implies the traditional values and lives of hard-working village farmers—an indication of the JVP’s rural base of support.

For 2 weeks, the army and the police failed to control insurgents’ power. By April 11, at least 92 police stations had been attacked. Besides the five that were captured, 56 others were damaged, and 43 more abandoned by the government “for strategic reasons.” In nine areas of the countryside, insurgents controlled hundreds of square miles. In addition to many wounded on both sides, some 37 police officers and 16 members of the armed services were killed.

In Pollonnaruwa, fighters dressed in blue uniforms attacked using stolen buses and trucks, but the police prevailed. Beating a retreat, insurgents abandoned some 500 unused hand bombs, shotguns, first aid kits, and the bodies of 39 comrades.

Using the state of emergency, the United Left Front government met the JVP's attacks with ferocious violence. The Old Left LSSP and CP were the most vociferous parties in the government calling for the ruthless suppression of the uprising. Old Left leaders who were part of the cabinet denounced the JVP as “mad adventurers...that must be totally exterminated.” These “Golden Brains” as they were known to their admirers, never tired of condemning the “gutter people”—rural youth who joined the JVP. Nowhere in the world was the Old Left-New Left schism more violent and hateful than in Sri Lanka.

We will never know the real extent of the murderous spree. Clearly hundreds of people were killed—some say tens of thousands. While imprisoned in 1972, Wijeweera claimed that 15,000 revolutionaries had sacrificed their lives, along with as many as 30,000 civilians who had been killed. At that time, government figures of the total killed range from 12,000 to 50,000—although Prime Minister Sirima subsequently calculated the number killed at 1,200. Michael Colin Cooke claims between 5000 and 10,000 JVP cadres and sympathizers were killed.⁴⁰ Attanayake estimates between 8,000 and 10,00

⁴⁰ The Lionel Bopage Story (Colombo: Agahas Pubs, 2011) 160

killed.⁴¹ According to the Criminal Justice Commission, the JVP was responsible for killing 41 civilians and 63 members of the Armed Forces as well as wounding 305 members of the Armed Forces.

Noted British author Fred Halliday was part of the chorus of voices that appeared to have exaggerated the number of deaths. His figure of 12,000 was 10 times the prime minister's number of 1,200. In Parliament during the debate about the number of insurgents killed, opposition speakers used figures between 5,000 and 10,000—exaggerated estimates used to discredit the government. Asia Watch claimed at least 3000 and perhaps as many as 10,000 people were killed.

Many others were brutalized. Soldiers humiliated a beauty queen, Premawathi Manamperi of Kataragama. They made her strip and parade herself in front of dozens of soldiers at gunpoint. Although accounts vary about her being raped, she was murdered on April 17, 1971. On April 19, the *London Times* featured a story on a massacre in Mawanella where rebel soldiers had been taken to a bridge and shot so their bodies would float down the river. "Army officers ruled out a truce with insurgents today, directing mortar fire on strongholds and ordering summary execution of prisoners believed to be rebels. 'We have learned too many lessons from Vietnam and Malaysia we must destroy them completely,' said Lieut. Col. Cyril Ranatunga, a graduate of Sandhurst military Academy in Great Britain." Similar stories were reported in *Le Monde*. Another senior officer was quoted as saying "once we are convinced prisoners are insurgents, we take them to the cemetery and dispose of them."⁴² Undeterred by such reports, the government of Great Britain delivered six Bell helicopters to Sri Lanka. For his exemplary service, Ranatunga went on to become an Army General and served as High Commissioner in London.

Normally portrayed as a one-day affair, the 1971 uprising continued for at least two months. Newspaper records in the National Archive indicate sporadic attacks and government "combing-out" operations on June 2 in the Pallekelle Forest Reserve. On June 5, Prime Minister Sirima offered a second amnesty after 6,000 insurgents had surrendered to the authorities a few

⁴¹ Anula Attanayake, *Sri Lanka: Constitutionalism, Youth Protest and Political Violence* (Matara: Self-Published, 2001) 94; Victor Ivan, *Paradise*, 133, says 1,200 (which was the official statistic)—likely double that. Gunasekara says tens of thousands.

⁴² *The Times* April 19, 1971 page 12

weeks earlier.⁴³ On June 10, an insurgent camp in Anuradhapura was destroyed; one thousand prisoners in Polonnaruwa were overtaken by sore eye disease.

As the intensity of the fighting died down, Prime Minister Sirima called on insurgents to surrender, and thousands came forward. Altogether 14,000 people were taken into custody. As the prisons overflowed, two universities were converted into large holding cells. Inside the prisons, dissident factions subjected each other to beatings and discrimination. Pro-Wijeweera inquisitors established people's courts, and capital punishment was occasionally meted out along with beatings and various forms of humiliation.⁴⁴ So great were the internal schisms that rival members of the JVP politburo had to be held apart by authorities. A series of spectacular jailbreaks and attacks on prisons freed hundreds of JVP prisoners.

When trials finally did occur, of the 3908 "hard-core" activists who were kept in custody until the end of 1971, only a few dozen were sentenced to long imprisonments. Wijeweera was sentenced to life for "waging war against the Queen" and 41 other leaders were each given 5 to 20 years. About 390 others were also punished.

One of the reasons why judicial punishment was mild compared to what could have happened was the strength of civil society. Professionals such as doctors, religious leaders, artists, professors, teachers and even rival politicians like JR (always out to make political hay) publicly pressured the government to release the youth. During the uprising, many people had sheltered the insurgents without supporting their cause.⁴⁵

Some 90% of the insurgents were between 16 and 32 years old. Sinhala Buddhists comprised fully 94%, the next largest group was Roman Catholics, who comprised about 3 to 4% of the insurgents. The majority was fairly well educated as a result of widespread free education. Altogether, over 80% of the 10,192 suspected insurgents were from the unemployed, underemployed,

⁴³ Ivan, *Paradise in Tears*, 138

⁴⁴ Chandraprema, 41-42

⁴⁵ Interview with Chitral Perrera, March 12, 2014

working class and students between 16 and 30 years old.⁴⁶ The majority of the monks who fought in the 1971 uprising disrobed and became laymen, revealing their distance from the *sangha*. Few insurgents were rural farmers. The JVP had little or no base among the masses of Indian plantation workers, whom they viewed as an instrument of “Indian expansionism.” In a remarkably candid speech to the Ceylon Criminal Justice Commission while under arrest, Wijeweera maintained that the JVP “was implanted in the rural proletariat, though also in the lumpenproletariat and certain petty bourgeois layers. In the urban working class and the estates, the influence of the Old Left was still paramount.”⁴⁷

Of all dynamics, perhaps the most central and least discussed is that of caste oppression. One can talk of rural unemployment, but it the lowest castes that suffer from it. One can speak of police brutality and the army’s violence, but it the lowest caste people who feel its brunt. If we speak of the lack of educational opportunities, it is the lowest caste people who suffer most from it. Indeed, when we examine which areas were most successfully captured by the JVP in 1971—Kegalle, Pindeniye, and Warakapola—these are areas where lower caste people are concentrated.⁴⁸ According to Victor Ivan, most JVP killings in 1971 targeted upper caste *Goyigamas* while the army targeted low caste people.⁴⁹

In areas that fell into their hands, the JVP did little to organize a popular uprising. The most they did was to take over local administrative units and to confiscate weapons from people in order to arm themselves. Youthful insurgents enjoyed their bureaucratic supremacy in the new roles they claimed during the insurrection.

So poorly armed were even the police whose rifles were hand-me-downs from the Boer War. With little thought having been given to the possibility of an insurrection against it, the government worried that the JVP might succeed. In this moment of truth, pretenses of autonomy and national sovereignty were

⁴⁶ A.C. Alles, *The JVP 1969-1989* (Colombo: Lake House Investments, 1990) 251

⁴⁷ Blackburn, 245

⁴⁸ Interview with Patric Fernando, March 12, 2014

⁴⁹ Interview with Victor Ivan. He also believes most LTTE killings were of high caste Velabe.

thrown to the wind: they begged the Indian government for help—100 Gurkhas were quickly dispatched to the international airport. Nearly all governments contributed to the defense of the government: the USSR sent five MIG fighters; Pakistan funneled aid from the US; China offered the government interest free loans; the British sent helicopters, small arms, ammunition; for the first time in a decade, a British warship, the aircraft carrier Albion, crossed the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka. Only the North Koreans were apparently supportive of the uprising, but the government quickly shut down their embassy and expelled the entire diplomatic staff. Although the insurgents had portrayed the government as isolated and movement as internationally popular, nearly a dozen countries rushed assistance to the embattled state: besides those already mentioned, also involved were the United States, Singapore, Egypt, Australia, and Yugoslavia. In a message to Prime Minister Bandaranaike, Chinese Premier Chou En-lai fully supported repression of the uprising. "We are glad to see that thanks to the efforts of Your Excellency and the Ceylon Government, the chaotic situation created by a handful of persons who style themselves 'Guevarists' and into whose ranks foreign spies have sneaked has been brought under control."⁵⁰

Western radicals glorified the insurrection and exaggerated its dimensions. Believing that the clash in Ceylon was an indication of future uprisings, Robin Blackburn named Wijeweera "a leading representative" of the "new generation of revolutionaries emerging on the subcontinent." Fred Halliday claimed "despite their defeat, the JVP has shown that armed insurrection is a real and possible form of revolutionary struggle in colonial and ex-colonial countries today."⁵¹

So inspired by the 1971 insurrection was the United Secretariat of the 4th International that they denounced the "Marxist" traitors who were part of the government's cabinet.⁵² From within the Sri Lankan movement, the principal response to the haughtiness of imperial Trotskyism was penned by Hector Abhayavardhana, a longtime activist who had spent much of his life in exile in India. After British Trotskyist Fred Halliday claimed that "thousands of poorly armed peasants rose in organized rebellion against the very government they

⁵⁰ Blackburn, 360

⁵¹ Halliday in Blackburn, 218

⁵² A Lost Generation, 28

had voted into power in the previous May,” Abhayavardhana retorted: “This is a figment of his imagination, though it appears to have been the substance of press reports in imperialist countries. There were several hundred youth, most of them in their teens, who combined in armed groups to take police stations by storm. Not many of them were actual cultivators. The majority of those who surrendered to the authorities or were captured in combat were well-educated and even already in white-collar employment.”⁵³

Armed insurrection certainly is the crowning moment of the awakening to action of a sizable fraction, if not the majority, of the population. Insurrection as Lenin reminded us must rely upon a revolutionary upsurge of people. Yet in 1971 JVP attempted to substitute its organization and armed struggle by a handful of revolutionaries for the actions of masses of people. The JVP did have a sizable membership in 1971, with estimates ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 members, but their insurrection failed to mobilize broadly.

No uprising can reach proportions of note without massive popular support. In fact, what the JVP did in 1971 should more properly be called an insurrection, some would even say a putsch, than a genuine people’s uprising. Drawing the participation in social movements of masses of people in Sri Lanka has never been a problem for those seeking to transform archaic and corrupt political and economic structures. Nearly half-a millennium of servitude to colonial masters left both an entrenched elite more loyal to wealth than to justice as well as millions of marginalized subaltern people ready to take matters into their hands. Yet the JVP attempted its insurrection without mobilizing massively the people, instead relying on its own activists to seize power.

Prior to the Paris commune, Marx had warned of the dangers of premature insurrections. Indeed, he believed even that a massive uprising in 1871 would only set back the movement for decades. The 1971 insurrection was poorly organized and had no chance of success, a premature and amateurish farce. Still in the process of emerging from a bitter factionalist debates (of which there were continually many in the JVP), some party leaders were not on talking terms with each other. As we will see, the 1987 JVP insurrection, was also a ferocious attempt to seize the government. It, however, turned into a

⁵³ Hector Abhayavardhana, *Selected Writings* (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 2001) 235; Fred Halliday, see “The Ceylonese Insurrection,” in *Explosion in a Subcontinent*, edited by Robin Blackburn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 151-220

tragedy of even grander proportions that shaped the psychology of the island's people for generations.

Outcomes of the 1971 Insurrection

Despite the one-day revolution's abysmal failure, the insurrection, at least in the short-run, pushed Sri Lanka further in the direction of socialism. Symbolic measures, such as the government's issuing a new postage stamp with Lenin on it, the first time a foreigner had been so honored, was one indication of this shift. Villagers' political psychology changed, and they felt newly empowered.⁵⁴ Before the last of the rural areas had been pacified, the country's unions called for a 5-day workweek. Austerity for the rich, ceilings on incomes, and limits on ownership of land and houses were imposed. On May 18, jail sentences were mandated for landlords who illegally raised rents. On May 26, PM Sirima promised a host of reforms—including land reform, housing, education, foreign exchange, income and fiscal policies. She also ordered the deportation of some 30,000 Indian agricultural workers, and in the next months nationalized British tea estates, enacted a Land Reform Act and initiated constitutional reform.

At the same time, the United Left Front government extended the tenure of parliament for two years. The regime promised to build socialism, by which they meant planned economic development, national control over crucial sectors of the economy, collective or cooperative forms of ownership over wide areas, ceilings on land ownership incomes and increased popular participation in development. A five-year plan was implemented beginning in 1972 that promised to provide jobs to rural youth and to upgrade the unemployed urban and rural poor, landless laborers and small peasants.

As K.M. de Silva noted: "the insurrection of 1971 left an indelible mark on Sri Lanka. The rebels, although defeated, played a part in shaping the future. Sri Lanka was pushed more rapidly towards being a socialist society: the moves begun under the United Left Front in 1970 for an autochthonous constitution for Sri Lanka were hastened; a powerful impetus was given to the adoption of a series of radical economic and social changes, the most far reaching of which were the Land Reform law of 1972 [which confiscated all land in excess of 50 acres and led to nationalization of plantations in 1975], state control of trade

⁵⁴ Interview with Victor Ivan, March 15, 2014

and industry was accelerated and expanded to the point where the state has established a dominance over the commanding heights of the economy."⁵⁵

Progressive measures, however, were not by far the only results of the JVP's mad dash for power. After extending the state of emergency, the government passed new repressive legislation, the Criminal Justice Commission Act, whereby new rules of evidence that wiped out defendants' right to be heard during trials while simultaneously, without any appeal possible, made police testimony evidence that could be introduced as truthful. There were also other dire side-effects: trade unions were curtailed; the press censored; the government became increasingly authoritarian; and ties with Great Britain and the United States were strengthened. Last but in no way least, from an army of 7,000 in 1948, it expanded from 58,660 in 1971 to 235,000 in 10 years. Over the next decades, state violence would reach horrific levels, resulting in the killing of tens of thousands of people. The genesis of this killing machine—the institutionalization of murderous state violence—has been traced directly to the 1971 JVP insurrection.⁵⁶

If they had come to power, the JVP would more than likely have committed crimes of the kind of the Pol Pot variety of "communism" rather than the more humanitarian Cuban example. In an email on November 11, 2014, Basil Fernando gave his view on the JVP's beliefs: "The JVP was molded on the ideological foundation created by Joseph Stalin and believed in the use of terror as a progressive instrument for change. What this meant was that intimidation and fear were necessary components of success and all moral considerations should be abandoned in the pursuit of the objectives of the party. The absurdity, to which such an ideology was lead to, became clearly manifested in over, literally, thousands of incidents that took place throughout the country. The security forces acted with even more cruelty and ferocity."

Ideology not sole dimension of JVP's mentality. Similarities to the cultural background of Cambodian Maoism's extermination campaigns are striking.

⁵⁵ K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2005) 664

⁵⁶ Jane Thomson-Senanayake, *"Not even a person, not even a word": A sociological exploration of disappearance in Sri Lanka*. Although my previous studies of uprisings have found much evidence of their positive effects, Sri Lanka's history proves on balance the opposite.

Taking the friezes chiseled into the walls of Angkor Wat as a point of departure, we find temple paintings in numerable places in Sri Lanka similarly depicting gruesome scenes, such as a variety of tortures inflicted on wrongdoers in “*Niraya*,” a Sinhalese version of hell. The “ten tortures” and “32 tortures” are most famous. In both Cambodia and Sri Lanka, brutality is celebrated in ancient symbols preserved in national treasures—a far distance from the erotic mosaic walls and floors of ancient Greece. A people’s history and traditions are not written simply on the walls of archaic structures and in the folklore; they are inscribed deeply in archaic structures of mind, in the unconscious and consciousness that constitute national attributes—of what Hegel would call the *Volksgeist*.

Many others have remarked that one only need to read the ancient *Mahavamsa* to anticipate the ruthless character of the JVP. Justification for killing can found in ancient comparisons of enemies to “wild Beasts.” The origin of the nation described in the *Mahavamsa* is the story of violence, parricide and incest. The prodigal daughter of a Bengali king mates with a lion and has two children, who later help her escape from the lion. When the lion prowled from village to village searching for his family, his son kills him, takes his sister as his wife, and together have 32 sons, the eldest of whom, Vijaya, was exiled to Lanka with 700 others in the 5th century BC. The Sri Lankan flag is the only one in the world with a ferocious wild beast.

In Sinhala tradition, protection of Buddhism justifies extreme violence. After the primal Sinhalese hero Dutthagamani bloodily defeats Tamils and unifies the state, he asks his spiritual advisors (*arahants*) how he can be comforted after causing the slaughter “of a great host numbering millions?” “Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee O’Lord of men,” the arahants responded, “Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest and not more to be esteemed than beasts.”

Beneath the pacifist surface of Sinhalese Buddhism, violent passions lurk unseen, and can easily be stirred in the face of threats on the nation. Perhaps that helps to explain why the JVP meted out “severe punishment” to hundreds of ordinary people suspected of being government informants. Victims were burnt alive, beheaded, disemboweled, chopped to bits, and brutalized in scenes reminiscent of the depiction of “*Niraya*” on temple walls. As C.A. Chandraprema understood his compatriots’ mass psychology: such rituals “reflect the infinite capacity of the Sinhalese to hate, envy and cruelty when

they feel called upon to do so. Cruelty in the Sinhala mind manifests itself as a reaction to 'wrongs' committed. When the Sinhalese react, it is in their nature to react with the most unbridled ferocity."⁵⁷

After the JVP insurrection had been defeated, nationalist aspirations united the vast majority of people more than ever, and the government was quick to play on these heartstrings. In May 1972 a new constitution for the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka was adopted, declaring the island independent of the British crown and renaming Ceylon as Sri Lanka. Dr. Colvin R. de Silva of the LSSP drafted the document, abrogating his party's past progressive position on Tamil nationalism. Among the small committee of MP's who helped de Silva was ever-resilient UNP leader JR Old Left leaders had railed against previous governments' "reactionary, anti-working class legislative provisions," but now they approved completely a new Public Security Ordinance that curtailed union rights.

While the new constitution appeared at the time to reflect many of the country's needs and aspirations, more recently it has been understood as part of the process of the constitutional demise of democracy. The new constitution eliminated one of the houses of parliament, abolished judiciary review and safeguards of minorities, and declared Buddhism as the state religion. Tamils became second-class citizens. As Dayan Jayatilleka succinctly wrote: "In a post-insurrection sop to Sinhala nationalism, a Republican Constitution was proclaimed in 1972, tightly unitary and denuded of rights and protective guarantees for minorities. That gave birth to the Tamil New Tigers, precursor of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)."⁵⁸

In the eyes of many Sinhalese, one of the great accomplishments of Sirima's administration was the 1973 "standardization" of education. Although Christian control of schools might seem to be a minor aspect of their violent campaigns against what the colonialists called "barbaric" and "heathen" natives, discrimination in education stuck in the throat of Sri Lankans so much that when the government nationalized nearly all schools and granted affirmative action to the Buddhist majority, they fulfilled socialist aspirations of the electorate that had given the government its mandate.

⁵⁷ Chandraprema, 122

⁵⁸ Jayatilleka, 13

Free education offered the promise of escape from poverty and social oppression in the rural areas, but the jobs were not there, the cities were too expensive, and the government could not keep promises. Severe disappointment amid rising expectations, what sociologist James Davies called the J-curve, was compounded as global financial and mercantile interests squeezed Sri Lanka's fragile economy. From 1970 to 1975 import prices rose from an index of 140 to 471.⁵⁹ In 1972 and 1975, food crops failed. A balance of payments problem arose as imports of rice were needed because of food shortfalls. As prices of imports rose to unprecedented levels, the government was compelled to change its policies in response to demands of the IMF and World Bank: instead of austerity for the rich, food subsidies were cut.

The UNP's insistence that arrested JVP members be released after the 1971 uprising won them new supporters, and as the general election of 1977 approached, the JVP gave full support to the UNP, another example of Sri Lankans unique capacity to make political bedfellows of murderous enemies. In Abhayavardhana's view, the JVP was an important "instrument of the capitalist class" in so far as it derailed the socialist United Left Front government of May 1970, instilled in an entire generation a cult of violence, and collaborated with the UNP—"the most reactionary government that the people of Sri Lanka have had ever since universal franchise was made available to the masses in 1931."⁶⁰ While there is some truth to this perspective, it also fails to take into account the role of international banks and lending institutions in controlling the economy—and therefore the politics—of the world's small countries. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s in dozens of countries in Africa and Latin America, grassroots uprisings and riots were common responses to IMF-imposed austerity programs. Yet the turmoil's specific form in Sri Lanka was far bloodier than in any other part of the world.

It is not fair to blame entirely the JVP for the UNP's reconquest of a parliamentary majority. Post-independence politics in Sri Lanka is characterized by wide mood swings among voters, who have alternated between support for the Brown British and the more socialist SLFP. Yet JR's ascension to power would come to haunt the JVP and permanently scar the country. His sordid service as the Finance Minister who imposed IMF mandated price hikes that precipitated the 1953 hartal pales in comparison to

⁵⁹ Abhayavardhana, 318

⁶⁰ Abhayavardhana, 267

what was to come: his evisceration of the island's political system and brutal reign as executive president.

Yankee Dickie Takes Power

With the 1977 election, the UNP led by JR (Junius Richard Jayawardena), Yankee Dickie as he was commonly known, swept into power. Promising a "Just and Righteous Society," the UNP won a 5/6 parliamentary majority, assuring the imposition of their will without parliamentary opposition. So decisive was JR's victory, that the SLFP was a distant third to the TULF, which garnered the vast majority of votes in the North and East on a platform of "Eelam in six months." With 18 seats, the TULF became the main opposition party in Parliament. So distressed were Sinhalese nationalists by the results that in riots after the elections, some 100 Tamil were killed and 50,000 made destitute.⁶¹ Check this

As promised, after the UNP won the elections of 1977, the government declared a general amnesty, resulting in the release of all incarcerated insurgents including Wijeweera. On November 2, Wijeweera and other imprisoned JVP members walked out of prison with all their rights intact.

Under JR, the country's economic development took an abrupt turn away from socialist measures in favor of an "open economy," or as it is today named, neoliberalism. Free-trade zones were set up, controls on foreign investment were abolished, tourism promoted, the trade union movement repressed, and 200 square miles on the western seaboard of the island were made available to international corporations. Hoping to make Sri Lanka a miniature Singapore, JR set up an international banking zone offshore and sought several times to lease the country's deep-water natural harbor in Trincomalee to the US. So impressed were Americans with him that a biography by one US historian characterized JR as the "embodiment of democracy in South East Asia, a living symbol of non-violence." His close ties with the US angered India, who felt their regional hegemony to be threatened. Soon India began training LTTE youth to destabilize the JR government. But JR scoffed at such concerns. He had delusions of grandeur, referring to himself as the latest in a long line of the island's rulers going back to Vijaya.

⁶¹ Ivan p. 144

The origins of neoliberalism can be traced to Pinochet's regime in Chile, where American economist Milton Friedman was given carte blanche to experiment with a new form of *laissez-faire* capitalism after the US helped to overthrow the Allende government in 1973. The contemporary meaning of neoliberalism was first established among Spanish-speaking scholars, and today it is widely used globally to refer to the set of policies that seek to dismantle government services (except for military spending), "free" trade, privatization and reduced taxation of corporations and the wealthy. Whether Democrat or Republican, successive US presidents have enthusiastically encouraged the development of neoliberal accumulation regimes throughout the world. Given that such regimes require severe cutbacks in wage and state-services already won by decades of working-class struggles, people's resistance to neoliberal reforms has been met by overwhelming force. The origins of neoliberalism can be traced to Pinochet's regime in Chile, where the US government helped to overthrow the Allende government in 1973 and then gave American economist Milton Friedman carte blanche to experiment with a new form of *laissez-faire* capitalism.

After Friedman's corporatization of Chile, similar policies were enforced in 1976 in Argentina and Thailand (through violent repression of the student movement that had won democracy in 1973) as well as in Sri Lanka through what JR called the "open economy." In 1980, the US support for the suppression of South Korean democracy (especially the Gwangju Uprising) led to the imposition of neoliberal policies under the dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan. In the same year, a coup d'état in Turkey also ushered in the neoliberal era. Like its failure to acknowledge its encouragement and support for the overthrow of Allende, the US has similarly failed to take responsibility for the bloodshed in Gwangju. As these two bloody events also mark the onset of neoliberalism, the parallels are significant. "Neoliberalism" came into the world on the backs of thousands of victims: 2,000 alone in Chile in 1973. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, neoliberalism's triumphal expansion has led from crisis to crisis.

But the imposition of neoliberalism in Sri Lanka was different than in these other countries, where military coups d'état were needed. In Sri Lanka's case, JR accomplished the same administrative control by rewriting the country's constitution and creating an executive presidency enjoying practically unlimited powers as both the head of the state and commander-in-chief of the

armed forces. Drawn up by JR and his brother on July 23, the 1977 Constitution created the executive presidency modeled on the US but with one major difference: the executive presidency is not responsible to parliament or to the judiciary. With the UNP's 5/6 majority of parliament, the new constitution was rubberstamped by Parliament on October 4, 1977 and enacted into law without real deliberation.

After railroading the constitutional change, JR moved quickly, taking over the *Times of Ceylon* (loyal to the SLFP), amending the law to punish journalists, and using police and thugs to break strikes. So reticent were many of the Brown British, Sri Lankan political elite inside the UNP, to rule decisively that JR, a strong-willed and ambitious person, was sanctioned to wield power alone. Evidently 450 years of European rule had wiped out dissident voices among the comprador elite. The new generation embodied in the JVP organized clumsy collective attempts to grasp power in 1971 and 1987, but if they had been more attentive, they could have learned from JR's smooth manipulation of the process of taking power. As a member of the first post-colonial cabinet—then the infamous Finance Minister forced to resign by the hartal of 1953, JR had advantages and privileges never enjoyed by the marginalized rural youth of the JVP.

As in 1953, JR's policies undermined people's well-being. His "open economy" produced inflation of 26%, plunging many poor and working class people into desperate straights. In health and education as with other social services, instead of depending upon the government, individuals were required under the open economy to purchase services from private providers at market prices. Basic needs were not being met at the same time as income disparities sharply increased.

In this context, the island's working class seized the initiative and called a general strike for August 8, 1980. All major parties and civil society groups besides the UNP converged and moved toward the first island-wide action in years. The JVP was initially part of the strike leadership, but in July 1980, they suddenly withdrew. Unable to make the strike their instrument, they turned against its union leaders, forging documents and taking to the courts to stop them from acting. When the courts ruled against them, they took to physically assaulting union members who were not JVP.⁶² They claimed the movement

⁶² Interview with Chitral Perrera, March 12, 2014

was “Old Left” and that the strike would strengthen the Old Left at the expense of the New Left.⁶³

The Ceylon Teachers Union became de facto leaders of the movement. Although their members’ salary was 15 times that of the lowest 20%,⁶⁴ the union enjoyed broad support and attracted a sizeable following. A broad coalition of all the island’s trade unions—18 trade union federations in all—and many Left parties as well as the opposition political parties agreed on 21 demands, including reinstating railroad workers who had been fired for participating in 1978 strikes against an IMF package and the open economy, a COLA provision to fight inflation’s dire effects, and a long term rise in salaries.

Over 100,000 public and private sector employees voted to strike. On August 8, tens of thousands of strikers took to the streets in Pettah, so many that the police were unable to make them disperse. The government called upon the air force and armored cars to maintain order. The strike was the working-class response to the neoliberal assault on their socialist island. The government’s response was to impose a month of emergency rule and summarily dismiss tens of thousands of workers—at least 40,000.⁶⁵ Months later US President Ronald Reagan followed in JR’s footsteps and fired all air traffic controllers who went on strike.

In the aftermath of the emergency rule, Old Left parties were permanently weakened. Contrived criminal charges were used to marginalize mainstream political leaders, and the independence of the judiciary was undermined by the abolition of tenure for existing judges. Although the trade union ban was lifted after a few months, strikes all but disappeared from the social landscape for decades. Few rallies occurred, and no concerted campaign for workers’ rights was mounted for years. In the words of one strike leader, “After every struggle, we moved backwards.”⁶⁶ With peaceful strikes blocked, grassroots

⁶³ Interview with Chitral Perrera, March 12, 2014

⁶⁴ Attanayake, 142

⁶⁵ Jayatileka, 275 says 60,000. Colin R de Silva dedicates his book, *Sri Lanka’s New Capitalism and the Erosion of Democracy* (Colombo: Ceylon Federation of Labor, 1988), to the “40,000 strikers of July 1980 who were deemed to have vacated post under emergency regulations.”

⁶⁶ Interview with Chitral Perrera, March 12, 2014

pressure for change was released into more radical avenues, and the JVP saw itself revived as never before.

JVP Revival

Classical political history in France is rightfully thought to be complex, with monarchies giving way to republics and then to empires, only to be following by restorations of the old order in one form or another. The bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 was accomplished by the massacre of at least 30,000 people. By contrast to their French cousins, British and US politics are so stable that we use the French phrase, *coup d'état*, to name seizure of power by a small group since there is no English equivalent.

Despite its elaborate entanglements, France's complexity pales in comparison to Sri Lanka's contemporary political transitions and bloodshed. Turmoil is so complex that one year a party is mandating the merciless decimation of its opponents—and in response hundreds of its cadre are butchered—while only a few years later, the same two parties enter into a coalition. This process of extermination and alliance is so convoluted that the JVP today is in alliance with the SLFP—the very party they sought to overthrow in 1971 and which ordered them to be wiped out. A similar alternation of coalition and murderous antagonism exists as well between the JVP and the UNP.

Not only did relations with other parties fluctuate widely but so did the JVP's position on the major issue of Tamil nationalism. After the party's legalization in 1977, their newly-released leaders adopted a new line on Tamil nationalism and recognized their right of self-determination. They published *The National Question and the Constitution of Sri Lanka* in which they affirmed that, "The existing state in Sri Lanka today is a multi-nation State, made up of people who speaks Sinhala and Tamil, who are transforming themselves from nationalities to a Lankan Nation. The decision as to whether they are to live together with the Sinhala speaking or separately from them, namely, whether they are to form one State or two separate States is entirely in the hands of the Tamil-speaking people of this country."

The 13th amendment to the 1977 Constitution had created eight provincial councils as part of a process of the devolution of power designed to satisfy Tamils, and in district elections and parliamentary by-elections between 1977 and 1981, the JVP had received thousands of votes. As the party slowly rebuilt from its 1971 debacle, its hard-core membership stood at approximately

30,000 in 1977 compared with only 20,000 in 1971. About 100 mass rallies were held every year from 1977 to 1980, and a monthly newspaper was reported to have a circulation of about 20,000.⁶⁷ The party also produced separate publications for students and workers as well as a Tamil language newspaper. Touring the country, a musical show entitled "Liberation Songs" was performed in over 100 places.

Steadily building membership from cells of a few people in district, electoral and area levels, the JVP surpassed 100,000 members in the 1980s. In addition to cadre, the JVP also included eight fronts in their organizing departments: youth, students, monks, peasants, trade unions, women, culture and propaganda. In addition a variety of front organizations were created for students, workers, soldiers and monks, notably including the DJV (*Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparaya* or Patriotic People's Movement), which carried out many of the JVP's armed actions in the 1980s. In 1982, one thousand monks affiliated with the JVP marched "in their distinctive saffron red robes under the banner of the socialist monks front."⁶⁸ The JVP developed strong support from monks. One activist JVP monk, Murruttetuve, was chosen leader of the Nurses' Union, and he opened his temple to all, including feminists speaking on behalf of nurses. On March 8, the temple celebrated International Women's Day. D.M. Ananda, the third highest-ranking JVP leader, was a monk when he enrolled at Peradeniya University, but he subsequently gave up his robes.

In 1981 the JVP successfully contested elections for the District Development Councils, winning 15 seats in 6 districts. In the presidential election of 1982, Wijeweera polled more than a quarter of 1 million votes, finishing third behind the two major parties and garnering five times the vote of the Old Left LSSP. During his election campaign, he consistently told enraptured audiences that the country's problems were the result of colonialism and neocolonialism, whose structural legacies were maintained by both the UNP and SLFP. Only the JVP, he asserted, could demolish those structures and free the people from the yoke of centuries of conquest. While he stridently opposed external powers, he said little to encourage people to rise above their own internal limitations, to change the psychology that colonialism and their own history had molded.

⁶⁷ Indradasa, 80-84

⁶⁸ Amunugama, "Buddhaputra and Bhumiputra?" *Religion* 21 (1991) 126

As inflation took its toll on the island's poor and working class, even the middle class was affected. So unpopular did JR become that only a miracle could have prevented the opposition from retaking control of the government. Like Napoleon, who had crowned himself so famously when Pope Pius VII hesitated in Notre Dame cathedral, JR moved decisively. When he deprived Sirima of her civil rights on October 16, 1980 to prevent her from running in the next election scheduled for July 1983, the JVP supported him. He moved national elections up by nearly a year and had himself elected the country's first president. With the rubber stamp approval of his 5/6 majority in parliament, he then railroaded a referendum giving him the right to call elections any time after 4 years in office and to extend the term of parliament for another 6 years.

The referendum of December 22, 1982 is seen by many as a watershed in Sri Lankan history—as the end of parliamentary democracy. The issue on the ballot was to extend the term of Parliament until August 1989. Even before the referendum had been scheduled, a vast array of civil society groups opposed it. The Voice of the Clergy, comprised of Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders, vociferously opposed it. Their campaign literature was confiscated by ex-head of Presidential Guard Kulasiri Udugampola. After the Supreme Court found him guilty of tampering and fined him, JR announced smugly that the fine would be paid by the presidential fund, after which he promoted him to Senior Superintendent of Police. Many people doubted the accuracy of the vote and decried the violence and intimidation that preceded it. With 54.5% of votes, the government won this referendum—although many people decried the violence that preceded it and questioned the accuracy of the tabulation.

As opposition continued to mount to his one-man rule, JR denounced the main opposition party—the SLFP—as “Naxalites” and unleashed his police and goons to attack their candidates and public gatherings. While police watched, monks were manhandled, furniture destroyed, and candidates assaulted and thrown into the gutter. Using the excuse of the presence of alleged Naxalite insurrectionaries, JR canceled the general elections scheduled for July 1983. Although he subsequently called it a mistake, clearly JR subverted the democratic process in Sri Lanka when he substituted his referendum for general elections.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Gunasekara, 189

Watching with glee as the SFLP was under attack, the JVP continued its public organizing under the protection of JR's government. Prior to the 1983 referendum, about 1,500 JVP delegates gathered at Wattala Town Council Assembly Hall to become poll watchers during the approaching elections. Little could they have known that JR would soon proscribe the JVP, and those registered names would serve as death lists for government killers. Quite unexpectedly Tamil militants using a Claymore mine killed 13 policemen in the north. The corpses of the police were brought to Colombo, where a Sinhala mob went on a rampage, setting fires and attacking Tamils.

Like a wildfire, the riots spread to other parts of the country. Beginning on July 24, 1983, Sinhalese mobs attacked whatever Tamils they could find—neighbors, coworkers, and business owners were beaten, killed and made homeless. For seven days, police and the government stood by while mobs burnt, looted and killed. Gangs arrived in government-owned trucks and buses with voter lists and addresses of business owners and Tamil residences, leading many to see the government's collaboration with the violence.⁷⁰ "Black July" is estimated to have resulted in a death toll between 400 and 3,000, with 8,000 homes and 5,000 shops destroyed. About 150,000 people were made homeless, resulting in a wave of migration out of the country—and of course, a surge into militant Tamil groups.

After standing by while pogroms unleashed terror on Tamils, JR spuriously blamed the Left and outlawed the JVP, the NSSP (a left-wing breakaway from the LSSP), and the CP. Although the bans on the NSSP and CP were soon lifted, the JVP remained proscribed for five years until May 10, 1988. The ban took the group by surprise, and as they struggled to overcome its limitations, they once again resolved to overthrow the government. Wijeweera claimed a Mossad plot to kill him. JR's accusation that the JVP instigated the 1983 pogrom against Tamils is comparable to Hitler's blaming communists for the burning of the Reichstag in 1933. In both cases, radical parties opposed to the government's overall program were banned, sent underground and persecuted. JVP lawyers challenged the presidential proscription in the Supreme Court, but the judges ruled against them and upheld the president's right to enforce emergency regulations. After proscribing the JVP in July 1983,

⁷⁰ Tambiah, 73

he also abrogated Tamil representation in parliament—leading to more violence in both the north and in the south.

In 1984, the JVP had changed its position on the Tamil struggle and advocated the “maintenance of Sri Lanka as a multinational unity state” that required the defeat of the Tamil Eelam movement’s objective of securing independence in the north.⁷¹ The party’s change in position on Tamils led Lionel Bopage and others to leave the party. Now that the Tamil Tigers were understood as “objectively pro-American” the JVP regarded them without sympathy. Indian imperialism was seen as having regional “hegemonic designs” to expand its economic and territorial ambitions, and the Tigers were its fifth column inside Sri Lanka. The more India pushed Sri Lanka to sanction election of Provincial Councils as a means of easing Sinhala domination of Tamils, the more the JVP saw an Indian imperialist plot. Therefore, when the Provincial Councils Bill was raised, the JVP compared it to the Kandy Convention of March 2, 1815, which the British used to gain control of the entire island. By this time, the JVP had become the most anti-Tamil party in the country, and they accused the Sri Lankan government of having ties to the capitalists of Jaffna and promising them a separate state. One of their slogans was “The JVP is banned while the TULF leaders are assured of their physical safety!”

As in 1971, students were in the forefront of struggles, and many were killed in 1984 and 1985. A plethora of student movements had united under the banner of the JVP’s Socialist Student Union, but as a rival Independent Student Union (ISU) organized, violent conflicts ensued within the movement. On December 15, 1986, Colombo University’s ISU leader Pathirana was abducted and killed. As a cycle of counterattacks ensued, administrators closed the campus. When classes resumed on February 5, 1987, clashes again broke out as fighting initiated by independent students intent on enforcing their “ban” on JVP members escalated into a campus riot. Two weeks later, a JVP monk who came onto campus was surrounded and slapped around by ISU activists. In response, about 150 monks converged to initiate a *satyagraha* against the ISU. As the fighting escalated, ten ISU students were taken hostage and brutalized. Once again, the only reason campus fighting stopped was closure of universities for three years until the end of 1989.

⁷¹ Chandraprema, 89-90

In April 1987, the JVP began a series of raids on military camps to collect weapons. It resolved once again that its only survival option was to destroy the government, and a new insurrection was prepared in earnest.

At the same time as the conflict between the government and the JVP escalated, JR moved to defeat the Tamil northern insurgency. Having used the Black July riots to proscribe the JVP, he believed he could also put an end to the LTTE. Arrogantly using a parliamentary maneuver, an oath requiring all MPs to swear allegiance to the Sri Lankan state, he denied elected Tamil MPs their seats. With moderate leadership ejected from Parliament, India became increasingly protective of Tamils. From 1983 to 1987, Indian intelligence agency trained hundreds of Tamil fighters from half a dozen groups in special camps inside India.

Open season was still being practiced on Tamils. On May 12, 1985, the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) herded about 70 Tamils in Velvittithurai inside the town library, which was then blown up, killing all of them. As the cycle of violence expanded, on May 14, 1985, Tamil militants dressed in Sinhalese army uniforms massacred 146 Sinhalese civilians near the sacred Bo tree in Anuradhapura.

The JR government had opened talks with the LTTE and 5 other Tamil resistance parties in Bhutan on Aug 13, 1985 but the talks were a dismal failure since JR refused to accept any talk of a separate state. When the talks collapsed, the government launched a new offensive, after establishing a special task force of police commando—open only to Sinhalese and trained by Israeli security specialists and British police. The national police force of some 25,000 men only included about 600 Tamils.

From 1985 to 1986, as a spiral of grisly massacres of Tamil civilians by the SLA was answered by equally bloody massacres of Sinhalese, the Tigers fought to a draw a massive campaign by the SLA and air force to retake Jaffna. As the bloodshed mounted, JR and Gandhi declared a cease-fire on April 10, 1986. Massacres continued on both sides. LTTE leader Prabhakaran was taken by helicopter to Delhi where he met with Gandhi.

On January 8, 1987, a massive offensive was launched from land, sea and air against the LTTE strongholds in the north. In response, the Tigers gunned down 126 commuters in Habarana on April 17, 1987, and four days later, a

massive bomb in downtown Colombo at the Pettah Bus Stand killed 100 and wounded 300.

On May 25, using helicopters, jets, armored cars and heavy artillery, the SLA launched a massive operation against LTTE positions in the east causing heavy destruction of churches and schools, and killing many civilians. In retaliation a week later, on June 2, 1987, the LTTE massacred a busload of monks returning from a pilgrimage, killing over 30. Assured of the strength of his position by Israeli, South African and Pakistani advisors, JR acquired new weapons systems and launched an all-out offensive on Jaffna. On June 3, an Indian attempt to break the blockade and supply essential goods to Jaffna was stopped by the Sri Lankan Navy. The next day, Indian transport aircraft protected by jets dropped 25 tons of food on Jaffna. They made clear to JR that any attack on their air convoy would be considered an act of war.

As pressure from the Indian government mounted for Sri Lanka to end its blockade of Jaffna, an Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord was signed on July 29, 1987, and the next day, Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) arrived in Jaffna. Two particularly onerous parts of the accord were that a Provincial Council was to be elected in the north and east that would have all the powers held by a state in the Indian Union, and that no part of Sri Lanka would be “available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India's interests.” Sinhalese were furious at Indian penetration of their island’s sovereignty. Many Sinhalese saw the Provincial Councils as an Indian imposed form of federalism. So widespread was resentment against India that one of the bodyguards assigned to protest Gandhi when he arrived to sign the accord struck him on the parade grounds. Worse, some 38 people were killed in riots in Colombo.

Although clearly unpopular, JR was forced to sign the Indo-Lankan peace accord because of India's military superiority—specifically its Mirage 2000 fighter jets. Once the peace accord was signed, the JVP battle cry became “Motherland Above All!” a slogan that resonated widely among university students and monks. Even before the peace accord was signed on July 29, 1987, protests in Colombo turned into violent attacks on Tamils. On July 28, at least 200 monks, gathered with students and party politicians including Sirima around the sacred Bo tree in Pettah, the commercial center of Colombo. Black flag-waving monks called on people to resist India's control of the island. The JR government sent in the riot police. As the crowd scattered in all

directions, their violence became directed against minority Tamils. The crowd set fire to over 80 buses, cars, and buildings—even hospitals. At least 19 people were killed and more than 100 wounded by police gunfire. Although a national curfew was announced, in continuing protests, at least 132 people were killed by the forces of order between July 28 and August 2, more than 1000 vehicles destroyed, and 508 government buildings were torched.⁷²

Another reason for the government's signing this unpopular accord was because it did not have the military strength to fight the insurgency in the north at the same time as it was faced with the JVP's insurrection in the south. Without the IPKF, the Sri Lankan military could not have fought the JVP insurgency. Although the JVP and LTTE both opposed the Sri Lankan state and its peace accord with India, they were never able to unite into a common struggle. No coalition was ever seriously discussed. Although both the supreme leader of the JVP and LTTE stemmed from the same fisher caste, their shared status was of no importance on an island divided by national identity. The result was years of slaughter in the south followed by a bloody denouement in the north in which tens of thousands of civilians on all sides were killed and both the JVP and LTTE all but wiped out.

The JVP interpreted the provisions of the pact as part of American imperialism's desire to balkanize Sri Lanka in order to control the island's eastern port of Trincomalee. Just as the US had benefitted from India's division from Pakistan and Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan, US imperialism was seen as encroaching upon Sri Lanka. For its own reasons, India supported the Tamil insurgency not only because of the close ethnic ties between Tamil Nadu and Hindu Sri Lankans but also because of the "rabidly pro-American JR Jayawardena regime." India financed, trained, armed and deployed Tamil fighters purposely to destabilize Sri Lanka when an American military presence was being courted. With a comprador government selling off the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, desperate measures were taken by the JVP. They disrupted transport services in much of the country and stepped up attacks on the military. The July 1987 anti-Tamil riots gave the JVP the feeling they could easily take power, that the masses of Sinhalese would support them as the only anti-Tamil party. They dubbed the IPKF the "monkey brigade," and imposed a death sentence for selling Indian goods such as saris

⁷² Ivan, *Paradise in Tears*, 169

and potatoes, banned the sale of newspaper supporting the government, and restricted the size of funerals of those whom they killed.

At this time, the LTTE and all armed Tamil groups were granted amnesty in Sri Lanka after a ceremony where they surrendered their arms to the IPKF on August 5, 1987. At that time, the LTTE was estimated to have 3,000 members, with many times that operational base.⁷³ Many Tamils opposed the surrender of their arms. On September 27, 1987, Amirthalingam Thileepan, LTTE political leader in Jaffna fasted to death. He had called for removal of the IPKF from the north and the east. Before he passed, he expressed hope to meet the other 650 LTTE martyrs. More than a dozen other LTTE cadre who were captured with a boatload of dynamite also killed themselves. Thereafter the LTTE declared the peace accord invalid and launched attacks on the IPKF in which 153 Indian soldiers were killed, 38 wounded and 47 missing. When the IPKF bloodily took Jaffna, the LTTE fought them, killing at least 153.⁷⁴

On August 18, 1987, the JVP lobbed a grenade into a parliamentary committee room, shocking the nation. The next day they publicly announced that, “all those MPs and their lackeys who like to live, should resign their seats and confess their faults and rise up against Jayewardene.” A wave of resignations from the UNP soon spread even into the banking sector. By setting up a parallel system of power, they openly prepared for the overthrow of the JR regime. “KILL JR!” became one of the JVP’s most commonly used slogans. For his part, JR became even more rabidly focused on maintaining his power. On December 20, 1987, JR openly called on the security forces to “Kill, kill and kill the brutes!” President JR famously shouted at a rally, “they should be crushed like animals.” He rammed legislation through parliament that granted executioners impunity.

Soon extrajudicial executions, torture and public displays of mutilated corpses occurred on a level without precedent. As the country became a “smoldering hell of unidentified dead bodies,” so rabid did JR become that on May 20, 1988, he publicly invited Wijeweera to fight a face-to-face duel at Galle Face Green. Even lawyers who sought a modicum of due process for suspected rebels were themselves killed. Returning from court on September 24, 1988, Attorney Wijedasa Liyanarachchi was abducted by Udugampola. After he died in

⁷³ M.R. Narayanswamy, *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerillas* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994) 280

⁷⁴ Narayanswamy, 243

Colombo Hospital, an autopsy determined he had 19 broken ribs and 250 other internal and external injuries. By May of 1993, 22 other lawyers had been murdered.⁷⁵

With Liyanarachchi's murder, the climate of hatred reached a climax. Professional bodies of all kinds protested and the country came to a standstill. Schools and businesses closed, transport shut down, white flags of sorrow appeared everywhere. So extreme was the regime's reactionary character that the National Security Minister accused Amnesty International (a Nobel prize-winning human rights advocacy group) of being a terrorist organization after they reported "thousands of murdered perpetrated by government supporters and 'death squads' on one side and anti-government militants on the other." JR finally ordered the killings to stop, but he was unable to reign in the forces he had unleashed. Three college students were found bestially killed after security forces unleashed a tiger on them.

With the country coming apart at the seams, Sirima reappeared at the head of a 7-party alliance and held talks with JR, but her demand that he step down was answered with greater violence. Hundreds of people were killed weekly; at the end of the week of November 27, 1988, at least 46 people were slain in 36 hours in the south. Leading the assault on the JVP was JR's personal assassin, Udugampola, who personally directed death squads to arrest, torture and kill JVP sympathizers, their parents and families. Scores of homes were torched in the south—In response, the JVP's heartland. Finally, the JVP retaliated, burning Udugampola's ancestral home, killing his mother, brother and 3 other family members. Udugampola then organized 3 squads of 15 men—each of whom had suffered at the hands of the JVP. Thousands of corpses were generated.

JVP infiltration of the military from 1987 to 1989 was so successful that they claimed to have 80% of the military on their side.⁷⁶ One JVP statement appealed to the "patriots on of the armed services, police and secret police: you should understand that we have no intention of causing harm to you. We will link up with you against the traitors. Get prepared to point your guns not at patriots but at the traitors." The government worried that soldiers were not enthusiastic in fighting the JVP. Apparently many members of the armed forces

⁷⁵ Gunasekara, 291.

⁷⁶ Premadasa, 186

felt they should be fighting the Tamil Tigers, not “our own boys.” The JVP anticipated a large-scale military mutiny would bring them thousands of armed recruits, at which point they would be assured of their coming victory.

The JVP began to attack and kill its ex-members before moving on to kill Leftists and ordinary people who opposed them. As a result, people began increasingly turning against them and offering information to police.⁷⁷ In the first year after the signing of the accord, the JVP killed a total of 541 persons, and the killings the following year totaled 4530.⁷⁸ JVP targets included over 1500 government supporters, more than 50 members of the United Socialist Alliance, more than 60 Provincial Council members or candidates, more than 400 government workers, and 283 policeman and 161 members of the Armed Forces. In January 1988, the JVP systematically targeted left-wing organizations to “punish traitors to the motherland.” Among others, members of the LSSP, NSSP, ISU, and the All Lanka Peasants Union were put on JVP hit lists. Leading up to the 1988 Provincial Council elections, the JVP killed 45 candidates. On December 1, 1988, they bombed a United Socialist Alliance rally, killing 4 and injuring 30.

By mid-1988, the JVP sought to establish a National Liberation Government. They presented to all opposition parties (then grouped together as a united front) a proposal that no election should be held unless the presidency were vacated, the government resign, provincial councils dissolved, and all repression against the JVP cease. After negotiations with the SLFP, an eight party coalitions was created that included the Tamil Congress and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. When the other parties called for the suspension of Parliament only, not the presidency, before the elections, the alliance deteriorated and the JVP resorted to greater violence in an attempt to stop the elections.

Realizing that the situation was out of control, JR lifted the prescription on the JVP on May 10, 1988. He repeatedly invited the JVP to negotiate, but the JVP's response was to escalate their war against the state. In June 1988, when the government remained intransigent to an ongoing strike in the Sri Lanka Transport Board and workers' resolve began to soften, the JVP sought to maintain the strike through coercion. Workers were caught between the

⁷⁷ Interview with Chitral Perrera, March 12, 2014

⁷⁸ Indradasa, 137

bullets of the JVP and the army's guns. During the month-long strike, the JVP killed an estimated 130 workers and destroyed about 200 buses. On September 12, 1988 the JVP's call for an island-wide hartal received great support. The issue most prominent was the torture and killing a well-known human rights lawyer, Wijedasa Liyanarachchi on September 5. Photos depict a deserted scene at the normally packed Fort Railroad Station.

On October 22, after the corpses of three students were discovered, another surge of anti-government support came to the JVP, who again called for an island wide hartal, this time on November 3. A communiqué named Order Number 14 of the Joint Commanding Headquarters of the Patriotic People's Armed Troops declared that "all shops, hotels, private and commercial establishments should close; that all government offices and banks should close; all transport should stop; all gas stations should close; no one should watch government television or listen to government radio; and everyone should switch off their lights and remain in darkness on November 3 until midnight."

That same month, the People's Revolutionary Red Army (PRRA) first appeared. Their posters threatened that "All supporters of the JVP would be crushed like flies and mosquitoes." In the next year, the PRRA waged a reign of terror on the JVP. Many people believe that the PRRA was a creation of left-wing activists who were under attack by the JVP, but others insist it was another government death squad. The JVP considered all elections illegal and planned to launch a decisive offensive after the election of 1988. The state's Minister of Defense blurted out at a press conference that "the place for gorillas is in the zoo. JVPers are not gorillas but terrorists. We will eliminate terrorism within three months."⁷⁹ As the number of JVP prisoners increased, spectacular jailbreaks occurred through tunnels and other means, and many JVP prisoners were killed when the army was called in to put down prison riots.

Ten days after workers at the main oil refinery near Colombo went on strike, JR invited the JVP negotiations on November 17, 1988. But the group refused, citing "the unpatriotic, illegal, anti-people and unfair Presidential election."⁸⁰ Despite his obtuse and murderous tenure, JR knew his leadership had been

⁷⁹ Attanayake, 207

⁸⁰ Attanayake, 206

disastrous. When Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa maneuvered for the presidency, JR stepped aside.

Promising to send the Indian troops home and be “the humble servant of the common man,” President Premadasa, himself the country’s first president from a subaltern caste, campaigned on a platform of adopting a conciliatory tone toward the JVP and LTTE. With a record low turnout, Premadasa won a very narrow victory in elections on December 19, 1988. He revoked the government’s emergency powers, released 1,800 prisoners (including nearly all JVP prisoners), and offered to negotiate with both the LTTE and JVP. Although opening negotiations, he also tightened controls over the workforce. In pre-election violence, the JVP killed over 1,000 people.

True to his promises, Premadasa’s administration sought to bring peace within Sri Lanka. After offering peace to the JVP, he integrated rather than attacked celebrations of International Women’s Day, and negotiated with all Tamil separatist groups.⁸¹ He ordered the IPKF, then numbering over 100,000 troops, back to India, thereby outmaneuvering the JVP’s super-patriotism.

The upcoming parliamentary elections—the first in 11 years—were a decisive test for the state. After bomb attacks on election rallies of opposition parties, the government enacted new restrictions. The day before parliamentary elections scheduled for February 15, the JVP ordered a two-day curfew, which they steadfastly enforced through murder. They killed at least 27 people who had the boldness to walk outside. According to police statistics, the JVP killed in total 14 candidates and 517 civilians.⁸² The elections were literally a life-and-death choice for many voters. When the results were announced, Premadasa’s UNP had won a decisive majority.

The government launched a winning hearts and minds programme and again offered to negotiate with the JVP, but workers and students were massively active, their expectations raised by Premadasa’s campaign promises. The JVP imposed hartals on March 9 and March 22, 1989, again ordering people not to leave their homes, and in some places to switch off lights and televisions and radios. In May, an island-wide strike broke out in almost all essential services

⁸¹ *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka*, edited by Swarna Jayaweera (New Delhi: SAGE publications, 2002) 259

⁸² Ivan, *Paradise in Tears*, 189

—transport, health, posts and telecommunications, and ports. Student unrest in the universities became widespread and more violent.

The JVP's parallel government exerted as much power—if not more—than the central government. When a curfew was declared, people asked, “Which curfew?” Many felt the JVP delivered more effective justice than that of Sri Lanka courts. Thieves who were apprehended by the JVP were often hanged from the nearest lamppost. Their hartals, strikes, darkouts and curfews, enforced by brutal violence, were often more stringently observed than anything ordered by the government.

In the first six months after Premadasa's election, nearly 2,000 people had been killed, whether by the government or the JVP. After the government reintroduced emergency regulations in June 1989, the JVP targeted their terror against factories producing tea and rubber, 44 of which were destroyed. A deliberate campaign was waged to destroy the country's economic infrastructure. Public utilities, postal services, irrigation works, transport, electricity, and factories were destroyed in large numbers.

On June 3, 1989 the JVP's Interuniversity Student Federation organized a huge rally in Nugegoda. About 60,000 people attended, all of whom supported the JVP insurrection. The impressive turnout reflected the JVP's continuing strength. On June 6, 1989 students at Peradeniya University captured three men they believed to be spies, questioned them, and then killed them, leaving their bodies burning on campus. Soon thereafter, students at another university also took the lives of suspected informants. In July 1989, the Minister of Defense again ordered all universities closed indefinitely.

For six months from the time of the government's reimposition of the state of emergency in June, the monthly death toll never fell below 1000. The military was mobilized both to fight the JVP insurrection and to contain the restive working class. When bus workers went on strike, the army drove the buses. When dockworkers refused to unload food ships in Colombo port, the navy did so. As the government's counteroffensive became more brutal and better organized, opposition parties called for fresh elections that would include the JVP. Once again the group's leadership refused to cooperate. They stepped up their violence, killing the president's sister-in-law and torching government buildings across country. JVP murderous sectarianism found its way into the temples as some junior lower-caste monks executed more conservative senior

monks. In Dayan Jayatilleka's view, the JVP operated in the same tradition as Pol Pot, Mengistu, and Bernard Coard in Grenada—a kind of “cannibalistic anti-imperialism.”⁸³ The violent and cruel insurrection from 1987 to 1989, unlike the 1971 rebellion, degenerated into acts of extreme brutality. Tellingly, fewer women participated in the 1987 insurrection than in the 1971.⁸⁴

According to President Premadasa, by November 14, 1989 the JVP had killed 5860 people, including 21 Buddhist monks, 1772 members of the UNP and 497 members of the police and armed forces. They had also destroyed more than 1000 buildings.⁸⁵ For the government's side, one estimate tells us that in the first 2 years of Premadasa's rule, some 40,000 new cases of disappeared people took place. On one day alone, December 21, 1989, 146 corpses were found in Hambantota district, most headless burning on piles of tires.⁸⁶

Despite their ruthless militancy, the JVP could not match the army's firepower. With the support of a plethora of foreign governments, SL acquired shiploads of weapons, while the JVP captured a few here, more there—but never on the scale of the government. Despite repeated JVP promises, no large-scale desertions from the military took place, while death squads were ever more murderously efficient.⁸⁷ Created by “Sandhurst-returned, Scotland Yard/West Point-trained security Top Brass,” these engineers of death left heaps of corpses in every village, town and city center from 1989-1991.⁸⁸

In July 1989, the JVP leadership issued an ultimatum to all members of the police and armed forces. They promised to kill their family members if the security forces did not immediately resign by August 20. As JVP killings of innocent civilians escalated, members of the armed services and police, especially those who had lost family members, formed death squads with

⁸³ Interview with Dayan Jayatilleka, March 25, 2014

⁸⁴ Jayaweera, 264

⁸⁵ Gunasekara, 564

⁸⁶ Gunasekara, 667

⁸⁷ Premadasa (134) tells us that 250 desertions were reported in 1987's first half, and 2,250 in the four years leading up to March 1988.

⁸⁸ Gunasekara, 41.

names like Green Tigers, Yellow Scorpions, and Black Cats and began to claim responsibility for the brutal murders of suspected JVP members. Private self-defense groups formed on plantations after the JVP killed 17 estate superintendents.

On July 29, to commemorate the second anniversary of the signing of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord, the JVP called for an island-wide hartal in which people would congregate at places of worship and should not be seen on roads or in shops. The day before the hartal was to begin, some 5000 monks demonstrated wearing black masks. They called for end to the stepped-up killings and kidnappings by various paramilitary terrorist organizations. On the first day of the hartal, security forces reported over 150 deaths. Although the JVP had promised people that the armed forces would not open fire because of JVP cadre inside, the army did in fact open fire in many places.

After waiting four years for the Army to revolt, the JVP was desperate to stop the government's counter offensive. In their weakened state, they attacked the defenseless families of soldiers after their ultimatum expired on August 20, killing 122 of them, many very brutally who were hacked to death or burnt alive. Teachers and university administrators who opposed the JVP's presence on campus were also targeted. Some 44 principles of schools, 57 teachers, three university deans, and to education officers were killed by the JVP. At least 142 members of the media and superintendents of estates who refused to comply with JVP directors were also eliminated.

Writing in 2006, Nira Wickramasinghe believed that "in August 1989 the JVP was very close to achieving its end, which was the capture of political power. Its strategy of weakening the political apparatus and exhausting the state by taxing its meager resources was gaining ground. But for a number of reasons the JVP failed to strike the final blow at the legitimate state."⁸⁹ The above recounting of murders not indicates that the group acted resolutely, but that their actions had become devoid of strategy and instead were revengeful and punitive.

Revenge killings against the JVP became commonplace. Dead bodies were unceremoniously dumped on roadsides everywhere—25 to 50 corpses every

⁸⁹ Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2006) 239

day. On September 17, 1989, the military killed over 150 civilians near Kandy and left their bodies on the road. They promised to kill 12 people for every one killed by the JVP. Reuters reported, “the dead bodies floating in the Mahawali River have been washed ashore. Stray dogs feast on them. No one goes to the river now to bathe. Somebodies have even been put in wells.”⁹⁰

In August and September, murders by death squads reached their bloody apex after the JVP began killing family members of security forces. In September, death squads killed 180 people—including children and women—in and around the village of Mahawatte just outside Colombo. The country was outraged. All major political leaders and chief monks appeal to the president to declare an immediate cease-fire. The JVP called on people to stop paying taxes, not to buy bus or train tickets and to protest the “government’s genocide.” After prominent media persons were killed by the JVP to emphasize their order not to work, security forces took over radio and television stations, and armed services personnel read the news. Workers were caught between the death squads of the government and the killers of the “little government” as the JVP had become known at the time. The two conflicting powers fought it out without regard for civilian casualties.

Within the JVP, dissident voices began to be heard. One poster signed by “Sincere members of the JVP” appeared on walls in many places in October 1989: “Wijeweera, your twenty year ‘boon’ period is now over. You are no longer our leader.”⁹¹ Chandraprema asserts that the JVP leaders had long since become soft: “The JVP leadership have become too fat and lazy to go into the jungles. They had joined the jet sets driving new Japanese cars, eating turkey grilled in microwave ovens and carrying flasks of Scotch in their briefcases.”⁹²

Eight of thirteen members of the Politburo in the 1987 to 1989 period were former university activists. Although the universities were closed, students were in the forefront for both insurrections. A key constituency of the 1987 to 1989 insurrection was high status professionals and students from medical, engineering and science faculty. In 1971, the arts faculty provided a large

⁹⁰ Ivan, *Paradise in Tears*, 192

⁹¹ C. A. Chandraprema, *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror; The JVP Insurrection 1987-1989* (Colombo: Lake House Bookshop, 1991) 3

⁹² Chandraprema, 307- 8

majority of JVP activists. Unlike the 1971 uprising, when the JVP was confined to rural areas and small towns, in 1987 they had urban support, especially among government workers. In both uprisings, ascendant Sinhala-speaking insurgents challenged the continuing rule of the English-speaking elite. Thus the JVP insurrections can be considered as an emergent technocratic elite seeking to supplant the island's traditional "burghers."

On November 11, 1989, Wijeweera was arrested at a rural home where he had been living for some time under an assumed name. Shortly after he was taken into custody, he was executed. It is believed he was taken to Borella cemetery, tied to a trolley and cremated while alive. Within a week, nearly all of the key leaders of the JVP had been located and eliminated. The one surviving member of the Politburo fled the country. Once Wijeweera and the Politburo had been killed, JVP members appear to have lost their enthusiasm for killing. As subsequently reported in Parliament, the monthly death toll—over 1,000 for the past six months—dropped to 455 on January 15, to 111 in February, 48 in March, and 28 in April 1990.⁹³ The killings appeared to have peaked in October 1989.

We will never know the extent of the tragedy that befell the country before the second JVP insurrection was brought to an end.⁹⁴ In the epoch after German bombers leveled Guernica, civilian casualties no longer seem to be a major concern of the international community. The world's leading advocate of human rights, the United States of America, has been responsible for killing millions of human beings in Korea⁹⁵ (five million) and Vietnam⁹⁶ (more than three million) to untold thousands more—or is it hundreds of thousands?—in Iraq and Afghanistan. At a time when much of the world's people know little of such gross calamities, is it any wonder that Sri Lanka's suffering has largely been off the radar screen of international attention?

⁹³ Alles 303

⁹⁴ M. Sirisena, *World Bank and Neocolonialism* (Colombo: Stamford Lake, 2001) 201

⁹⁵ For Korean numbers see my *Asia's Unknown Uprisings*, Vol. 1 *South Korean Social Movements in the 20th Century* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013)

⁹⁶ For Vietnam, see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2013)

Fortunately, there are still a cherished few who seem to be paying attention. An Amnesty International estimated the number of deaths at 40,000. In 1992 a European parliamentary delegation stated that as many as 65,000 people had perished.⁹⁷ That same year on January 8, a UN Commission on human rights reported that the number of missing in Sri Lanka is “by far the highest number ever recorded by the working group in any single country.”⁹⁸

At the higher end of estimates of victims, some have counted nearly 60,000 people who were killed during the second JVP insurrection by security forces and insurgents.⁹⁹ Others use the number of claims over 40,000 people lost their lives in this uprising.¹⁰⁰ The All-Island Presidential Commissions of Inquiry officially determined that at least 23,087 unique cases of enforced disappearances had occurred. Families of the disappeared suggest a total of 40,000 to 60,000 disappearances between 1987 and 2007.¹⁰¹ The *London Sunday Observer* of July 19, 1992 reported that the “Black Cats” of the Sri Lankan police alone killed 40,000, at least according to former Sri Lankan police chief Udugampola, then in hiding before he received a job in port administration in Colombo.

Analysts tend to blame the killing and the uprising on such factors as unemployment, which may have risen to as much as 25%; anger over JR’s imposition of the pro-American “open economy”; the ongoing blight caused by caste division of society; and privileges enjoyed by those speaking English compared to the younger generation schooled in postcolonial schools where Sinhala was the language of instruction. In 1992, Justice Alles identified a principal cause of the second insurrection as state repression, specifically the denial of basic rights to students and trade unionists, as well as the proscription of the JVP in 1983. Few analysts have tried to comprehend the human factors that sanctioned tens of thousands of brutal killings.

⁹⁷ Gunasekara 10.

⁹⁸ UN Report E/CN. 4/1992/18/Add. 1 of 8 January 1992

⁹⁹ Attanayake, 223; Ivan, 193

¹⁰⁰ Chandraprema, 312, estimates about 40,000 people on both sides—about 23,000 killings by the security forces and vigilantes, the remaining 17,000 by the JVP.

¹⁰¹ Families of the Disappeared, *Clarifying the Past and Commemorating Sri Lanka’s Disappeared* (Katunayake: The Right to Life Human Rights Center, 2007) 12

In March 1990, the Presidential Commission on Youth released a comprehensive report investigating youth grievances, language policy, caste oppression, and the erosion of institutions. The report noted with irony that the celebration of 50 years of universal franchise in 1982 coincided with JR's infamous referendum that allowed him to extend the term of Parliament without elections. Commissioners urged the government to undertake a host of reforms – particularly to streamline the education system in order to find graduates jobs. As a result, poverty alleviation programs were intensified. Free school uniforms were distributed, and the Premadasa administration built a million new houses for the rural poor. Land was distributed to some 200,000 landless families. Public service positions were made available through exams rather than nepotism, and the 17th Amendment to the Constitution made public service neutral—although the 18th Amendment soon undermined that reform. Altogether, some 200 garment factories were set up in rural areas, providing jobs for youth as well as setting a stream of money to rural areas.

In 1991 as fighting with the LTTE continued, a parliamentary attempt to impeach President Premadasa failed. A Mothers' Front giving voice to victims' families opened on February 15, 1991. The next year, the united opposition organized a protest march against the government's corruption and terror. After 17 days of marching during which a thousand people joined every day, more than 100,000 people rallied on the final day. Current President Mahinda Rajapaksa was a key organizer of this protest, although his administration has been far short of embodying the values for which he stood up two decades ago. Sri Lankan politics being what they are, individuals abandon their value systems as quickly as the weather changes in New England. Previous enemies tire of killing each other and instead become political bedfellows. In 1994, the JVP once again ventured into electoral contests under the banner of the Sri Lanka Progressive Party. In local government elections in March 1997, the JVP won 101 seats in local administrative bodies. In the December 2001 parliamentary elections, 16 JVP members were elected to parliament.

On May 1, 1993, a suicide bomber at a huge Mayday rally killed President Premadasa. Although the LTTE is commonly blamed, doubts remain whether they were behind the assassination.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Victor Ivan told me that the bomber was not celebrated in the Tigers' Martyrs Museum, leading him to speculate as to whom else may have been behind the president's assassination.

Civil War

In Sri Lanka's south, with murder and mayhem on a vast scale, two JVP insurrections bloodily sought to overthrow the capitalist economy and rule by the "brown British." During the same decades in the island's north and east, minority Tamils—under attack and turned into pariah citizens—launched an even bloodier war of independence that claimed as many as 100,000 lives. Two and one-half years of dual power in the south produced tens of thousands of killings—as did 25 years of dual power in the north. Ideological factors and national identities prevented the JVP and LTTE from uniting, a possibility that nearly all analysts believe would have led to a far different outcome than the unitary state's victorious consolidation of power.

The Tamil today are a defeated people. Everywhere the evidence is in the shell-shocked faces of people, in the vacant lots of paddy land, the poverty of the north in comparison with Sinhala areas. In the words of their Tamil bishop, they face genocide—denial of language rights, land, and "genocide" on a daily basis. At night in Jaffna, blocks are cordoned off and all males taken away—sometimes with no return. The government is taking their lands, and they have little hope besides international pressure.

Arising as it did out of educated and privileged strata, the Tamil began peacefully enough under the guidance of their elite who wanted little more than a share of the newly independent country's wealth and power. The Tamil upper class led an ill-fated nonviolent and parliamentary quest for justice. For many Sinhalese, long marginalized by British divide-and-rule tactics, when Tamils said "equality," they heard "maintenance of privileges."

With independence, Tamils were very much a part of the nation's political system. Tamil political parties ran in elections, reaching plateaus of parliamentary representative in proportion to their minority status in population. The Tamil Federal Party participated in the 1953 hartal, and in 1956, when Sinhala-only advocates won the repeal of constitutional guarantees for minorities, they led the first Tamil struggle for rights, a peaceful *satyagraha* on Galle Face Green led by the Federal Party. Respectable, non-violent political leaders were viciously attacked by a mob led by Buddhist monks, and in the subsequent pogrom, some 150 people were killed. Again in 1958, hundreds of Tamils were killed by Sinhalese mobs. According to Asia Watch, mobs killed hundreds of Tamils and drove tens of thousands into

refugee camps.¹⁰³ Other violent waves of Sinhalese attacks against Tamils occurred in 1977, 1981, and 1983. Tambiah insists without any data that those Sinhalese who took human lives in 1977 were "typically drawn from the urban working class" and the urban underclass as well as students.¹⁰⁴ Wealthy elite students were a central part of the government death squads and JVP. While the scale of the violence is inordinately high, the peaceful character of this dimension of the Tamil movement can be compared to the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

After decades of violence against them, is it any wonder that Tamils began to fight back? Among the major factors driving Tamil youth into armed resistance to the state was their perception of discrimination against them in the sphere of education. The government's "standardization" policy adjusted downward examination scores written in Tamil, and a quota system offering special concessions for rural districts worked against educated youth in the north. Yet before an armed struggle made sense, moderate forces working for change had to have the opportunity to demonstrate the futility of their efforts.

In January 1961, after Sinhala had been in declaring the national language, the Federal Party again launched nonviolent direct action to assert the rights of Tamil-speaking people. On February 20, a few hundred protesters blocked government offices in Jaffna. Within days, the number of nonviolent protesters swelled to thousands, and protests spread throughout the major centers of the Northeast, paralyzing government work. When police attacked them with batons and bodily violence, the protesters remained passive. Mammoth demonstrations in Jaffna broke out with strikes and walkouts by doctors, students, lawyers, civil servants, teachers, taxi drivers, farmers, women and even Brahmin priests. On March 2, almost 100,000 people clogged the streets of Jaffna. On April 14, an independent postal service was inaugurated. Yet none of these measures brought any tangible changes.

For more than a decade, Tamils patiently sought to work within the established system. No matter that their struggle was peaceful. The more they insisted upon their rights—especially the official acceptance of their language, one of the world's oldest—the more Sinhalese reaction turned to violence. In

¹⁰³ *Cycles of Violence: Human Rights in Sri Lanka Since the Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement* (Washington DC: Asia Watch, December 1987) 13

¹⁰⁴ Tambiah, 74

19XX, PM Bandaranaika's willingness to compromise on the language issue resulted in his assassination, an omen of the violence to come. When Bandaranaika's widow swept into office, she immediately marginalized the Tamil opposition and elevated Sinhalese youth within the school system.

More than any other factor, the JVP's unexpected insurrection in 1971 closed off the possibility of peaceful change for Tamil and Sinhalese alike. As time passed, state violence, routinized in a massive repressive apparatus built to enormous levels after 1971, became increasingly directed against Tamils. When the International Tamil Congress convened a public meeting in January 1974, the police opened fire and killed nine Tamils. As a sign of the government's lack of concern, no inquiry into the killings was ever ordered. A few months later, on June 5, 1974 a 17-year-old student was arrested trying to rob a bank, and he became the first Tamil militant to commit suicide using a cyanide capsule that he wore around his neck. Hundreds of people crowded his funeral, and all shops in Jaffna closed. Step by step, a massive armed movement emerged.

Although a host of Tamil groups had secretly plotted an armed struggle, the LTTE quickly became the leadership of Tamil independence movement. They developed an air force, a navy and army. At the height of its power in 2002, they controlled three-fourths of the county's north and west (some 15,000 square kilometers). Through taxes, shipping revenues, extortion, and donations, their annual income was anywhere between \$200-300 million dollars. LTTE arms factories in Jaffna produced high quality mortars, mines and grenades, while Tiger police directed traffic, Tiger radio and television stations operated daily, and Tiger judges heard court cases. Their law college graduated 300 new lawyers annually. By 2002, more than 23,000 cases were heard in their courts and only 2% were appealed. In the 1,994 primary and secondary schools they administered, some 648,000 students were enrolled.¹⁰⁵ As one Tamil lawyer explained to me, under the LTTE, everything worked.

museum of martyrs glorified those who gave their lives. Popular belief revered them as the heritage of 63 Saiva saints (as related in the *Periya Puranam* in the 12th century) same devotion to Shiva was so intense that they committed fears

¹⁰⁵ Z.C. Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Government and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011) 118

sacrificial acts even against their loved ones and themselves.¹⁰⁶ Suicide bombers were completely devoted to the Tamil cause and, not just to Shiva but to Prabhakaran as a godlike figure. At their formal ceremony of induction, when they received their cyanide capsule, they recited from memory: “Our revolutionary organization’s purified aim is for a free society to achieve Tamil Eelam. My life and soul and all this I sacrifice to our organization’s leader, our brother, Mr. Prabhakaran. We fully accept that for him we will be very faithful and trustworthy.”¹⁰⁷

In the course of their rule, they assassinated scores of Tamil leaders—as many as 8,000 fellow Tamils according to the Jaffna-based University Teachers for Human Rights. Rival political parties were especially targeted. The first such action came on July 27, 1975, when the very popular Tamil mayor of Jaffna, A. Duraiappa, was shot dead by three youthful Tamil militants. Duraiappa was branded a “traitor” for his collaboration with the government. One of the assassins was Velupillai Prabhakaran, founder of the LTTE in 1976.

Prabhakaran’s many escapes and daring deeds made him a living legend at the same as the LTTE was beloved by most Tamils.¹⁰⁸ Much has been made of Prabhakaran's affinity for Hitler, whose military discipline and public salute he mimicked. No anti-Semite, he supported Israel and admired their capacity to commit whatever acts were needed to preserve the integrity of the Jewish state.¹⁰⁹

The LTTE constitution promised that the organization would dissolve once Tamil Eelam was established. Tamil people have long had a symbiotic relation with the sea, and it is no accident that the two major armed Tamil resistance organizations (LTTE and TELO) grew out of Velvittithurai, a center of smuggling in the north. A strict moral code was enforced among Tigers. LTTE members were prohibited from smoking cigarettes and consuming alcohol. They were ordered to avoid communication with their family members and

¹⁰⁶ Michael Roberts, *Fire and Storm: Essays in Sri Lanka Politics* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2010) 126

¹⁰⁷ As quoted in BBC Inside Stories, “Suicide Killers” 1991. Eelam is the ancient Tamil name for the island. The tiger was the symbol of the medieval Chola Empire, which had destroyed Sinhala Anuradhapura in the 11th century.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, 247

¹⁰⁹ See the discussion in Jayatileka, 24-26

prohibited from having love affairs or sexual relationships, since it was thought tender acts could deter their prime motive. (This policy changed after Prabhakaran married Mathivathani Erambu in October 1984.) With few exceptions, the Tigers did not take prisoners; even wounded GOSL soldiers were executed.¹¹⁰ The death penalty was pronounced for anyone forming new Tamil groups.

As with the JVP, loyalty to the supreme leader reflected a strict authoritarianism. The Tigers embraced Hindu traditions and permitted no “counterculture” like the western hippies or punks to emerge from within their ranks. On the other hand, it appears that they developed a feminist consciousness. Female fighters were called “Birds of Freedom,” a moniker that ascribed autonomy to their agency.¹¹¹ Although the LTTE liberated women from the kitchen and afforded them equal status on the battlefield, specific aspirations of women's liberation were subordinated to Tamil national liberation: “there is no sense of independent woman, empowered by her own agency, who makes decisions for her own self relaxation. Liberation is accepted only so far as it fits the contours of the nationalist project.”¹¹²

Yet a patriarchal gender division of labor appears to have been of little use within the LTTE. Women were involved in the armed struggle, and female suicide bombers carried out some of their most important assassinations. Women were mainly involved in the political wing and intelligence networks, electronics, communication, and medical care. The LTTE publicly embraced women's liberation. Adele Ann notes that women asked for their own autonomous structures to free them from reliance on males, a desire that the leadership of the LTTE supported.¹¹³ In 1980, an LTTE journal celebrated New York women's agitation in factories leading up to International Women's Day. The same journal devoted entire articles to the sexual division of labor, patriarchy, the double burden of household work, and the wife's right to divorce an oppressive husband. In areas controlled by the LTTE, dowry was

¹¹⁰ Roberts, 233

¹¹¹ Thiruchandran, 243-4

¹¹² Radhika Coomaraswamy, “Tiger Women and the Question of Women's Emancipation,” (*Pravada* 4, 9, 1996) 8-10 as quoted in Wickramasinghe, 298

¹¹³ Adele Ann as quoted in Thiruchandran, 247

banned. At the same time, LTTE posters encouraged women to have more babies.

The LTTE employed Tamil representations of women in classical literature to inspire female fighters. The story of a woman who drove away a tiger was appropriate, as was the epic of regicidal Kannaki, who killed the king after her eloquent call for justice for the murder by the king's agents of her innocent husband was not heard. Not content with her revenge, Kannaki then burned the city to the ground. The Tigers celebrated a mother who sent her younger son to war after her husband had been killed in the fighting. Cultivating ferocity in all fighters, the Tigers especially glorified the female suicide bombers. Two prominent feminists joined the LTTE, but later left the movement as a result of its increasingly dictatorial tendencies. The LTTE assumed that national liberation would come first, after which women's oppression "would be buried in its grave."

Rival Tamil groups were also conscious of patriarchal oppression. Although the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) was Marxist and revolutionary, its practice and theory regarding women's emancipation appears to have been less visionary than the LTTE. Formed in London in 1979 as a breakaway from the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), the EPRLF had about 6,000 members, nearly half of whom were women.¹¹⁴ Men living in Madras, India edited the group's journals, including its women's journal. Eschewing the mechanical view that women's liberation would automatically follow national liberation, the group's theoretical position supported an autonomous and independent women's movement.

Tamil women were the first to form a Mothers' Front to fight state terrorism. Similar to Women in Black in Argentina and to the May Mothers' House in Gwangju, women who have lost their loved ones to state violence joined together to demand an end to the abduction of young boys and men, nearly all of whom were tortured and many killed. In one episode alone, 630 young men had been taken away. In June 1984, the Mothers' Front marched nearly 1000 strong in Jaffna to demand the immediate release of their sons. Two months later, nearly twice that number stormed government offices in Jaffna after 500 innocent youth had been arrested.¹¹⁵ When the LTTE attempted to take over

¹¹⁴ Thiruchandran, 256

¹¹⁵ Thiruchandran, 229

the front, activists decided to disband rather than sacrifice their independence from the armed struggle.

The example of Tamil women led to the formation in July 1990 of a mother's front in the South, when state repression reached murderous proportions during the 1987 JVP uprising. Not only were young men systematically disappearing, but those who defended them and protested against the repression were themselves murdered. With a membership of nearly 30,000 women, the mother's front was able to win a reduction in the mass killings and disappearances.¹¹⁶ At a time when feminists and human rights activists were being murdered with impunity, the mother's front opened significant public protest space and had enormous influence on Sinhalese society. Mass rallies asked the gods to bring "a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us and lead normal women's lives."¹¹⁷ When the Sri Lankan Freedom Party sought to incorporate the Mothers' Front and use it against the state for its own political gains, many of its members simply left the organization.

The overall Tamil struggle involved two very different wings divided between parliamentary and armed actions. As militants built their armies, the moderates continued to work within the government. On May 14, 1976, the Vaddukoddai Declaration emerged from the first national convention of Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the latest incarnation of Tamil political parties that had included the Federal Party and Tamil United Front. With this declaration, the moderate wing of the movement claimed to have created the independent nation of Tamil Eelam in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

Although committed to a separate nation, the moderate wing continued to work within the parliament in Colombo. In 1980, the JR government agreed to devolve power through District Development Councils (DDC) as requested by the TULF—then the primary parliamentary opposition with 16 seats. Tamil militants violently opposed elections to these councils, seeing them as a sell-out of a separate nation. In 1981, after two Sinhalese police stationed in Jaffna were killed, their colleagues went on a destructive spree. Dozens of police, as many as 200 according to some estimates, burned the market area of Jaffna,

¹¹⁶ Thiruchandran, 233

¹¹⁷ Jayaweera, 268

the office of the main Tamil newspaper, homes, and the Jaffna public library, whose 95,000 manuscripts included your replaceable Tamil texts.

Tamil Tigers, armed by India with sophisticated weapons, stepped up attacks. In 1983, their Claymore mine wiped out a contingent of 13 soldiers, leading to the riots of Black July in which hundreds of Tamils were killed. Besides the previously discussed rampage, at least 53 high-ranking Tamil political detainees in a high security prison in Colombo were massacred. No charges were ever brought against anyone for those murders. On August 8, 1983, all TULF MPs were compelled to abandon their seats in parliament by JR's manipulative maneuver—a mandatory oath for MP's that they would not support a separate state.

The LTTE grew bolder in its attacks and the government ever more brutally counterattacked. By 1985, civilians were routinely murdered on both sides. In 1985, seventy Tamils were massacred in Velvittithurai (Prabakharan's hometown); in response, the LTTE killed 146 Sinhalese civilians in Anuradhapura. To enforce a monopoly on their power as the most prominent Tamil group, the LTTE also killed about 400 members of rival militant Tamil groups, such as TELO, the EPRLF and PLOTE. By the end of 1986, the LTTE controlled Jaffna, where they confined the Sri Lankan army to barracks and consolidated its own dual power. The LTTE fought more than 100,000 SL troops to a standstill, but as the government appeared to be gaining the upper hand, India came to their defense. At this point, JR signed the Indo-Lankan Peace Accord and agreed for the IPKF to enter Sri Lanka.

Under the control of India, upper-caste Tamils were treated preferentially, including in elections in the north and east for a Provisional Council. With 400,000 of 534,000 eligible voters participating, the EPRLF won 19 of 37 seats. As a majority of the government's local arm, the group then provided newly elected President Premadasa security when he visited Jaffna. The LTTE banned the Provincial Council, but relented in their violence when Premadasa offered both the JVP and LTTE a cease-fire. Moreover, when he asked the Indian army to leave by July 1989, he also hosted LTTE leaders in a luxury hotel in Colombo while his forces stepped up attacks on the JVP. As the IPKF left Jaffna, the LTTE moved back in—and they became more convinced than ever that they would be the leaders of a new country. On July 13, 1989, during discussions with two leading members of the TULF, an LTTE fighter pulled out a revolver and shot them dead.

Negotiations with the Premadasa government started on April 20, 1989 at the Hilton Hotel in Colombo. President Premadasa secretly ordered the army to give money and weapons to the LTTE to fight the IPKF. In addition, millions of dollars was also given to the LTTE. On August 2 and 3, 1989, a second massacre was perpetrated in Prabakharan's hometown, Velvittithurai, this time by the IPKF. Indian soldiers killed some 64 Tamil civilians after an LTTE attack had killed six Indian soldiers and wounded ten. The more than 100,000 strong IPKF began to leave in October, with the last out in March 1990. As talks continued in Sri Lanka on devolution of power to Tamils, a fragile peace held for one year—from June 1989 to June 1990—until the LTTE massacred some 600 Sinhala police who had surrendered to them.

The Tigers launched the Second Eelam War on June 10, 1990 after 14 months of peace negotiations. By July, the LTTE had forced the army to retreat so that the Tigers were able to recapture a large part of the Jaffna peninsula. In their newly reconquered territory, Tiger attacks on the Muslim minority killed hundreds. In only one of a series of massacres, on August 3, the LTTE attacked two mosques while Friday prayers were underway, and 120 people were killed. On October 29, the LTTE ordered all Muslims living in Jaffna to evacuate within 48 hours. Some 65,000 people fled Jaffna and became refugees.

Ruthless as they were, the LTTE's assassination teams were quite successful. From 1990 to 1993, they eliminated top Tamil moderates, Sri Lanka's minister of defense, the Navy commander and other top generals. On May 21, 1991, a female LTTE suicide bomber in Madras assassinated former Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi, and at a Mayday rally two years later, they killed Sri Lankan President Premadasa. Waging a multi-faceted war, Tiger frogmen launched a surprise attack in April 1995 and sank two Lankan navy gunboats in Trincomalee—an action dubbed by both sides as a "mini Pearl Harbor."

In late 1995, government forces finally captured Jaffna, but the LTTE retreated and reorganized. Their greatest victory came in April 2000 when they defeated the army at Elephant Pass and swept back into their heartland. For a brief interlude, it appeared that 40,000 Sri Lankan troops might be cut off in the far north. So great was the crisis that even Sinhala chauvinists who had bitterly opposed Indian intervention now called for help from India. As LTTE

troops advanced on Jaffna, the Indian Navy was poised to intervene.¹¹⁸ Over the next years, Indian intelligence worked hand in glove with the Sri Lankan navy, providing them with valuable intelligence. In 2007 alone, India's information helped the Sri Lanka to sink at least ten LTTE supply ships in international waters.¹¹⁹

For years, while the LTTE maintained a stable rule in Jaffna, they rejected (in 1995, 1997, and 2000) three separate autonomy plans offered by then president Chandrika Kumaratunga, daughter of Sirima and winner of more than 62% of the vote in the 1995 elections. In 2002 Norway's sponsored a cease-fire agreement and facilitated negotiations that resulted in a memorandum of understanding affording the LTTE equal status with the government of Sri Lanka. Privately, the Norwegians expressed their disappointment that they handed the LTTE a federal solution on a platter, but Prabhakaran, despite numerous promises that he would abandon the secession if a satisfactory power-sharing arrangement could be made, simply dismissed it.¹²⁰ The negotiations that began in 2002 were clear sign that the world the great powers, tired of paying the bills of the ongoing war, wanted a settlement. But neither side would give the other what it really wanted. The Tigers wanted a separate and autonomous state, and the Sri Lankan government refused to compromise on the issue of a unitary sovereignty for the entire island.

In 2005 when the US and British approved a moderate settlement offer and it appeared to be on the verge of implementation, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka ruled it unconstitutional—thereby setting the stage for another round of war. The army broke through and conquered the western 2/3 of the Jaffna peninsula, but the LTTE coordinated a massive exodus of people to Vanni.¹²¹

In 2006, Rajapaksa attempted negotiations in Geneva, and on Mayday 2007, he proposed devolution of power to the district rather than provincial levels. Tamil political leaders dismissed the idea as old wine in new bottles. When

¹¹⁸ Roberts, 89

¹¹⁹ Roberts, 300

¹²⁰ Roberts, viii

¹²¹ Roberts, 234

LTTE suicide bombs against the newly appointed army chief and the president's brother, also minister of defense, spelled the end of the talks.

In 2004, Tamil militants led by General Karuna had broken away to fight the LTTE, and with Tamil forces divided, it was only a matter of time before the Tigers' demise. From April 2008, when the SL army began to force the LTTE continually to withdraw, so greatly did Tamils admire them (or fear the SL government) that anywhere from 250,000 to 400,000 civilians followed the Tigers as they shifted positions. In the cynical words of their Sinhala enemies, the LTTE "took the sea with them."¹²²

The final battles took place in May 2009. Bloody massacres of civilians caught in the fighting went on for days, and any captured Tigers were summarily executed. Dozens of women were raped, after which they were killed and their corpses desecrated. Estimates of those killed in the war range from 60,000 to well over 100,000. Nearly 10,000 Sri Lankan troops were killed. Egged on by the US, Sri Lanka's victory over the LTTE was, in the words of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "one of the few instances in modern history when a terrorist group had been defeated militarily."¹²³

About 300,000 Tamils were held in camps, and five years later, many continue to be incarcerated. Today in the north, the army rules with impunity. Sweeps in the city continue to garner Tamils and to imprison them—many for five years already without trials. On the streets, Sinhala run roughshod. A father watching a cricket match was killed, but because the murderer was close to the government, he went unpunished. When one judge sought to punish the killer of a schoolboy, the judge was transferred "to save his life." For the first time in decades, no organized armed struggle against the government exists.

In 2009, President Mahinda Rajapaksa easily won a second term, defeating a dramatic challenge from General Sarath Fonseka, military hero of the final victory. Just as his predecessor JR had done to Sirima, after the election, Rajapaksa maneuvered on technicalities to deprive Fonseka of his civil rights and thereby ensured he could not run again for election.

¹²² Roberts, 295

¹²³ Quoted in Jayatileka, 1

A Culture of Criminality

The long-term impact of the bloodletting of the past four decades has been extraordinary negative. The creation of a culture that disregards the value of human life has been one of the major results of decades of uprisings in Sri Lanka. As one activist said to me, in the old days, if a dog was hit by a car and was yelping, people would come running out of their homes to help. But today, after death squads decapitated and burned human bodies in the streets, after anyone who took an interest in the dead was possibly the next victim, people have learned to look the other way. Traditional respect for the dead has vanished as a society built upon murder and deceit has arisen.

During the insurrections, politicians built up private death squads, and they continue to use them. Gangs and criminals have become part of the political elite. Victor Ivan speaks today of a “criminal state” with private armies composed of wealthy criminal gangsters close to politicians who work hand in glove with judges and police.¹²⁴ Criminals maintain private torture houses, where victims almost always relent quickly. In 1998, a series of murders revealed the ties of a prominent member of Colombo’s municipal council (himself gunned down) to the underworld. As “lumpen killers” loot and murder, the police do nothing to stop them. Journalists who report on violence are murdered or withdraw stories after threats are made. Bookies pump money into mass media outlets that feature glamorous life stories of criminals.

Extreme examples mix with the mundane: parents routinely are required to pay bribes to get their children admitted to private schools. A law passed in 1975 required all members of Parliament, judges appointed by the president, and dozens of other public officials to make a declaration of assets and liabilities every year. Nonetheless, members of Parliament have refused to submit such declarations. When a popular newspaper raised the issue, they simply looked the other way.

A nation-state but not yet a nation, Sri Lanka has yet to consolidate democratic values nor to build an economy that could make the island self-reliant and ecologically sound. In Victor Ivan’s estimation, the economy is composed of 800,00 tuk-tuk drivers, one million maids working in the Middle East, half a million police and army, and hundreds of thousands of people working as illegal smugglers, bookies, and dealers of liquor and heroin. As

¹²⁴ Interview with Victor Ivan, March 15, 2014

much as half the economy is black money. For Ivan, the whole society has been infected. Even religious leaders—whether Tamil or Sinhala, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian—are involved in criminal organizations.

The president is above the law. He can give land and take it away. After JR's self-serving imposition of an executive presidency, the state is modeled on that of Napoleon. Before then politicians were not rich. Today, all political parties depend upon black money. Gang services are widely available for eviction of tenants and settlement of debts. Legal relief for resolution of grievances has been all but abandoned.

The transitional government that was transferred to Sri Lankans in February 1948 had been crafted by the British to defend elite property and privileges, to centralize imperialist bureaucratic control. Successive postcolonial governments stripped this state of its secular features to empower it as an instrument of the racial and religious majority. Politics and religion have become hopelessly mixed together. JR's disempowerment of Parliament, his crafting of the executive presidency as a dictatorship, and assassination and kidnapping of opponents all became part of the political culture.

How did Sri Lanka arrive at its end point? A fragile post-independence state, manipulated by arrogant Yankee Dickie and his American friends, catered to its people's insistence on theocratic laws and Sinhalese demands for rectification of past discriminations. Reacting to the violence of JVP attempts to overthrow it and Tamil aspirations to break away from it, the state stands as a grim reaper controlled by no one, in which political leaders consort with the criminal underworld, and police do as they please with human beings whom they happen to encounter. Power is concentrated in the central government, in the executive presidency, in the Rajapaksa family. Whether activists like to admit it or not, Mahinda Rajapaksa grew out of movement ranks to become a corrupt and omnipresent "democratic" tyrant. Apparently, the movement for change in Sri Lanka has had more negative impact than is readily apparent. The Rajapaksa family stands to make billions of dollars from contracts proffered to China, as the government has accepted unsolicited, no bid offers to build a port city filling 500 hectares where jurisdiction will be Chinese and Sri Lankan laws will not apply. Similar agreements have been signed with four other countries.

In the past, the government relied on Western international institutions like the IMF and World Bank to stabilize its economy. Yet the result has been to impoverish people further. Shell Oil Company leased the island's gas company in 1995. The terms and conditions of the agreement was never made public. In 2000, the price of gas cylinder was increased by Rs.25 for the second time. The government of Sri Lanka had already paid Rs.400 million to Shell to prevent a price hike. In 1997 Sri Lanka Telecom was privatized, as were successful state-managed public utility services including telecommunications, gas, electricity and water, giving multinational corporations tremendous profitability. In 1998, Sri Lanka's premier seed farm was privatized, an enormous boost to the efforts of Monsanto Corporation to monopolize seed farms globally.

The global system privileged by the IMF, WB, and WTO rests on values that have little to do with decency and dignity. Just consider the following: More people starve today than ever before in history. About 29,000 children under the age of five—21 each minute—die every day, mainly from preventable causes.¹²⁵ These sad facts of life are reinforced daily by global corporations and their helper institutions.

- According to the World Bank, developing countries pay \$600 billion each year in debt service.
- Developing countries lose about \$500 billion each year as a result of unfair trade rules imposed by rich countries.¹²⁶
- The net worth of the world's 358 richest people in 1996 was equal to the combined income of poorest 45% of the world's population—2.3 billion people
- By 2012, the world's richest 200 people had a combined net worth of \$2.7 trillion, more than the world's poorest 3.5 billion people.¹²⁷

In such a world, talk of “human rights” is little more than noise unless it is accompanied by a vision to change the global economic system. The main factor in the world today is the descent of civilization.

¹²⁵ UNICEF statistics.

¹²⁶ Robert Pollin, *Contours of Descent*, Oxfam

¹²⁷ United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report*, Forbes, Oxfam

With nearly 200 armed militarized nation-states in the world, wars are fought without sanctions. In all major conflicts, great powers call the shots, exacerbate tensions, send in arms, and use technologically superior weapons such as surface to air missiles or cruise missiles. Everywhere the message is, the greater power will bomb with impunity. Weapons of mass destruction are used without impunity by nearly all nation-states—and of course, the USA is the prime example here. In 1937, the world was outraged when advanced technology German bombers wiped out the Spanish city of Guernica. Today, in the post-Guernica world, we witness nearly all major governments destroy civilian population centers with no protests raised. Driven by “human rights” concerns, US leaders have chosen to emulate Nazi Germany’s criminal bombings; they have disregarded Geneva Conventions concerning the rights of enemy combatants; they daily use drones to assassinate opponents...the list goes on.

The world’s main criminality originates far from Colombo—in London and Washington. If there is a lesson for small countries faced with colonial penetration of their sovereignty by great powers, it is precisely to win back control of their territory, their economies, and their politics.

Sri Lankans were not solely manipulated by European foreign powers, whose 450 years of Western colonial rule dwarfs in comparison to millennia of Asian states’ invasions and conquests. The entire history of Sri Lanka adds today in many people’s minds as restoring a bliss that never existed—neither an exclusively Sinhala state nor a land of milk and honey. The “chosen people complex” through which Lankans are to preserve Buddhism originates in millennia of attacks.

When Buddhism was all but extinguished from the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka preserved its traditions, even planting forests of followers in Thailand and Burma. Buddhist claims to be “righteous” and superior morally leads to a natural question: Isn’t the rule of divine values superior to decisions of representative democracy? In Thailand, conservative monks who support yellow shirts pose that exact question. In the name of “moral righteousness” they oppose the rule of the majority through elections and believe in enforcing what is “right” through street protests. In Myanmar as well, monks play the role of instigating and leading crowds against Muslim Rohingas.

Traditionally Sri Lanka was so integrated that anyone ringing the palace bell could gain audience with the king. A story has it that one day a cow rang the bell. The king discovered his own son had killed its calf for sport, so he punished his son. This story indicates the kindness felt by the king for an animal. Today, however, the gentleness of East Asian Confucian societies stands in stark contrast to the violence of caste and the self-righteousness of Buddhist intransigence in South Asia. As a result, everyday life for millions of people remains a living hell. Brutality meted out to fellow Sinhala on both sides during the JVP uprisings reveals a dimension of this cultural problem within the national psyche. Indeed, both Tamils and Sinhalese repeatedly employed murderous violence on civilians.

Rather than the island preserving the purity of Buddhism, Sri Lanka has become one of the world's bloodiest places. From the perspective of an outside, so perverted has Buddhism become that it may well be that American neophyte Buddhists, in their abhorrence of war, may be more true to the ancient teachings. Buddhism arrived in the United States during the period of the anti-Vietnam War movement, and it was from the start pacifist and absolutely opposed to war for whatever reason. There is no such thing as a just war: war itself is a crime.

The long-term psychology of people is rooted in many domains, and however we understand the origins of Lanka's violence, the fact remains that the tens of thousands of murders of the last four decades will stay with the island's peoples for at least that long to come—and almost certainly for generations beyond that. Sri Lanka's southern and northern insurgencies and the government's depraved actions created decades of escalating conflict in which all sides slaughtered civilians, has created today a society in which murder has been routinized, pales in comparison to the recent past. In a society where yesterday's murderers are tomorrow's allies, how can people be empowered? How can a process be established that cannot be subverted by elite politicians?

Sri Lanka is a shining example of how modern nation-states empower "democratic" dictatorships of the majority. In the name of sovereignty and self-determination, tens of thousands of people have been slaughtered. The resultant government may deliver the goods to enough people to maintain its stability, but has it brought justice and peace to the island? Can there exist a theocratic democratic socialist republic?

A rainbow coalition against the executive presidency has assembled. A demonstration on January 8, 2013 to test the depth of its support drew some 20,000 participants. Although military police and thugs with clubs threatened to attack, Bikkhus, trade unionists, lawyers, students and others were able to avoid violence as they made known their opposition to the prevailing system of governance.¹²⁸ Already a draft of amendments to the constitution to abolish the executive presidency has been prepared. The “Alliance of the Opposition” has agreed to run a common candidate in the next presidential election who promises to carry out agreed upon reforms within the first three months of his or her term in office. These reforms include: abolition of the presidential system and reinstatement of a parliamentary model; a Human Rights Charter and protection of the rights of all citizens; restoration of an independent judiciary; a commission to inquire into crimes of the recent past and seek reconciliation; a new requirement that candidates must submit declarations of assets and liabilities; the right of citizens to institute legal action against violation of laws without instructions of the Attorney General; reform of the electoral system; free, independent public mass media; education and health reform.

Perhaps the most important piece of the alliance’s vision is to write a new constitution. To that end they propose that a commission consisting of five members prepares the first draft within six months. Although the group calls for this commission to receive views of the public, it leaves the drafting to professionals. In my view, this may be too little too late. What the country needs is a reinvigoration of the public’s capacity to act and participate—not new and better professional politicians drafting yet another constitution.

In all past cases of constitutional revision, a small group of elite politicians met behind closed doors, and implemented the “tyranny of the majority.” Whether in 1971 or in 1977, shrewd politicians crafted legal frameworks that reflected their interests. Of course, the most villainous was in 1977, when JR landed himself the executive presidency. But the larger point is that such pieces of paper penned by an elite few can be changed later. If today, a group of legal experts restores the separation of powers within the system and empowers an independent judiciary, another group of experts can un-do that change tomorrow. If people are made to limit their participation to voting for

¹²⁸ Interview with JC Weliamuna, March 11, 2014

candidates, what is to prevent extension of parliamentary terms without elections—as has happened before?

A popular process of writing new constitution could have a far more lasting outcome. Examples of popular participation from the past include the tradition of the *Ting* in Denmark—a remarkable process of communal decision-making that has been invoked in Christiania to bring resolution of conflicts through collective deliberation.¹²⁹ Sweden has similar regular national forum that provide the possibility for discussion of the country's direction before elections by people with a wide variety of political perspectives. Switzerland's democracy provides another example that could be well adapted to Sri Lanka.

In the 20th century, we have seen the capabilities and capacities of ordinary people to rule themselves far better than elites—whether democratically elected or imposed by naked force. The most celebrated example is the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea, when people ruled their liberated city for nearly a week through direct democracy while defending it from military attacks. Their beautiful community, in which no crimes were reported, no banks robbed, in which people cooperated and shared food, provides us with an example of the popular capacity for self-government that emerges within contemporary society.

Other examples abound. After their successful uprising in 1992, the people of Thailand went through a protracted process of writing a new constitution and produced one of the finest in the modern world. Sadly, it was abrogated by the military coup d'état in 2006. In Nepal, since the abolition of the monarchy after the uprising of 2007, the country has been working on preparing a new constitution that can deal fairly with all the disparate castes, ethnicities, classes, genders, and age cohorts. All parties agreed in this interim period not to accept the introduction of new weapons systems—no matter how many times they were offered on favorable terms by the US and other world powers. Working slowly but deliberately, the *process* of crafting the new system of government is understood as being as important as the final outcome. In the United States in 1970, more than ten thousand people converged on Philadelphia to write a new constitution at the invitation of the Black Panther

¹²⁹ See discussion of Christiania in my book *Subversion of Politics*.

Party. The workshops produced far more visionary aspirations than the platform of the party.¹³⁰

Sri Lanka needs this kind of open-ended, inclusive process. The end is not simply a document but the establishment of real democracy, of participation by all citizens. Such a process would not copy parties' platforms but develop fresh thinking from the people directly. The island is small enough to implement such a democratic process, and the people are sufficiently politically aware to move ahead with it.

In the 21st century, Sri Lanka could become an example for the world of the best meanings of democracy and socialism. Nowhere did 20th century socialism empower the self-movement of people. By uplifting itself from the brutality of murderous violence and the legacy of elite rule, Sri Lanka could become a shining beacon of freedom, giving the world's people hope and inspiration. To do so means abandoning illusions of foreign help, whether from China or Britain, and instead centering its future on internal human resources, in which the island is incredibly wealthy.

¹³⁰ The documents of these workshops can be found in *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party* edited by Kathleen Cleaver and G. Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 2007)