

Sri Lanka Overview

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Environment

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) comprises one large, compact island and several islets, separated from the Indian subcontinent by a strip of sea which at its narrowest point is 40 kilometres and centrally located in the Indian Ocean, lying off the southern tip of India. Sri Lanka is strategically placed in the Indian Ocean, alongside major trading routes from the Far East, Europe as well as from Africa. In contrast to other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka's population has not shown an excessive growth since independence and the country boasts of high social development indicators, including a high literacy rate (by some accounts 96 per cent).

Peoples

Main languages: Sinhala (official and national language), Tamil (national language), English

Main religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity

Minority and indigenous groups include Sri Lankan [Tamils](#) (12.7%) (1981), Indian Tamil (5.5%) (1981) [Muslims](#) (7.4%) (1981), [Veddhas](#) 2,000 (1981 Census), and Burghers (0.3%) (1981). A census was conducted in 2001 however it was not carried out in 7 districts in the conflict area which are all minority populous areas.

Sri Lanka has a plural society. The majority group, the Sinhalese, speak a distinctive language (Sinhala) related to the Indo-Aryan tongues of north India, and are mainly Buddhist.

There are two groups of Tamils: 'Sri Lankan Tamils' (also known as 'Ceylon' or 'Jaffna' Tamils) are the descendants of Tamil-speaking groups who migrated from south India many centuries ago; and 'Up Country Tamils' (also known as 'Indian' or 'estate' Tamils), who are descendants of comparatively recent immigrants. Both Tamil groups are predominantly Hindu with a small percentage of Christians. They also speak their own distinct language called Tamil.

More than one-third of Muslims (includes Sri Lankan Moors, Malays and other smaller religious sects like Bhoras and Khojas) live in the north and east. The majority of these live in the east, where they constitute about a third of the population. The remaining Muslim community is dispersed throughout the

urban centres of Sri Lanka. Muslims are also divided between mainly agriculturists living in the east, and traders who are dispersed across the island. Muslims speak both Tamil and Sinhalese depending on the area they live in.

Veddhas or Waaniy-a-Laato (forest-dwellers) comprises a very small community of indigenous peoples. The entire community is in danger of extinction. Sri Lanka also has other, smaller communities, such as the Burghers who are of Dutch and Portugese origin.

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History

Post independence

The country gained independence from British rule on 4 February 1948. The first Prime Minister, Don Stephen Senanayake, sought to reconcile the legitimate interests of the majority and minority ethnic and religious groups within the context of a parliamentary form of government. His United National Party (UNP) entrenched its position within a year of the gaining of independence and strengthened its hold on Parliament.

The first major challenge to the UNP came from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), formed in 1951 under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The SLFP contesting under the coalition Mahajana Eksath Peramma (MEP, People's United Front) swept the UNP government out of power in 1956.

Growth of Sinhala nationalism

Bandaranaike came into power on the Sinhala nationalist card and his government was responsible for making Sinhala the country's official language, isolating the Tamil speaking ethnic Tamils and Muslims. However, in view of the political pressure emanating from the Tamil Federal Party, the main minority party, the-then prime minster proposed plans for preferential treatment for Tamils, and the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact of 1957 also promised 'recognition of Tamil as the language of a national minority'. The pact earned the wrath of the majority Sinhalese, which in September 1959 resulted in Bandaranaike's assassination by a Buddhist monk.

Rising separatism

His widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike succeeded him. She too continued with majoritarian policies. Her government introduced a new constitution, which established the country as a republic, severing constitutional links with the United Kingdom. While pursuing the 'Sinhala only' policy with great vigour and establishing the religious pre-eminence of Buddhism, the new republican constitution did away with the earlier constitution's safeguards for minorities. That same year a system of 'standardization' was introduced in the universities, which in practice meant that Sinhalese were given a better chance of admission than many highly educated Tamils. Tamil political parties were increasingly becoming disillusioned and slowly moving towards militancy. Tamils were also becoming victims of rising human rights violations including random mob violence.

Bandaranaike during her regime also faced a southern insurrection by mainly unemployed Sinhala youths. Several thousand young people, mainly university students are believed to have been killed or disappeared in the government sponsored crushing of this insurrection.

Economic upturn amidst increasing violence against minorities

The UF lost power in the 1977 general election and the UNP administration of Prime Minister J.R. Jayewardene took over. Jayewardene replaced the 1972 constitution and assumed unprecedented power as executive president, becoming both head of state and head of government. He was elected to a second six-year term in October 1982, and in a referendum won a mandate to extend parliament to 1989.

Jayawardane's UNP is largely recognized for taking Sri Lanka away from restrictive socialist policies practiced by his predecessors and for opening the country's economy to international trade and investment. But the situation for minorities hit a new low during his period. Festering tension amongst minorities, particularly the Tamils over continuous marginalisation and human rights abuses led to increasing militant attacks against State targets. The state backed pogrom against Tamils in the capital city Colombo and in other urban areas in July 1983 resulted in thousands of killings and several hundred thousands displaced. This is seen as a turning point in the Sri Lankan conflict leading to a full blown out war between Tamil militant groups and the largely Sinhala Buddhist Sri Lankan army.

Indian factor

In 1987 in a bid to appease the Tamils Jayawardene signed an accord with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that saw the disarming of Tamil militants in exchange for greater decentralization. Indian armed forces were brought into monitor the peace accord. All militant groups except the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) disarmed, leading Indian forces into bloody battles in the north and east of Sri Lanka (see details under historical context of Tamils)

In late 1988, Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa was elected executive president, and in 1989 the UNP won a large majority in parliamentary elections. Premedasa ordered the Indian forces out and began negotiations with the LTTE, which lasted just a few months. Premedasa also faced a southern uprising, led by the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), propelled by unemployment and rising social problems. His heavy-handed use of armed forces to crush the uprising resulted in thousands of killings and some 30,000 disappearances and is considered one of the blackest periods for human rights in the country's post independence history. In May 1993, however, President Premadasa was assassinated by a LTTE suicide bomber, and was succeeded by Dingiri Banda Wijetunga.

Parliamentary elections held in August 1994 saw the UNP government narrowly defeated by a coalition People's Alliance (PA), led by the SLFP under the leadership of Solomon and Sirimavo Bandaranaike's daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga.

New hopes for minorities

For three months Chandrika Kumaratunga remained prime minister as Wijetunga held the office of president. However, in November 1994 Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected president by an emphatic 62 per cent of the vote. Kumaratunga came into power with strong minority backing and one of her first tasks after assuming office was to start negotiations with the LTTE. She also pursued a parliamentary consultative process to produce constitutional reforms offering greater devolution of power to minorities. However this period of peace was short lived and once the peace talks collapsed Kumraratunga pursued a stringent military strategy. Years of battles in northern Sri Lanka left several thousands dead on both sides. Kumaratunga's most notorious military victory was the capture of the northern LTTE strong-hold Jaffna, where the rebels had been running a defacto state. Jaffna however turned into a hotbed for human rights violations particularly disappearances and torture of minority Tamils.

Kumaratunga was reputed for pursuing a tough line against the LTTE, including incessantly pursuing an international ban on the organization in countries like the US and UK. She won a second term in 1999, propelled by some element of sympathy having survived a LTTE suicide bomb attack that left her injured and blind in one eye. She continued her military strategy throughout her second term but towards the end she requested the Norwegian government to facilitate peace talks with the LTTE, though a new round of negotiation did not take place whilst her party was in government.

Consensual politics and new round of peace talks

In the 2001 parliamentary election the Sri Lankan public voted the United National Party on a largely pro-peace platform while Kumaratunga who belonged to the opposition political party the Peoples Alliance remained as President. It was unprecedented for an elected President to be of a different party to her government and opened new avenues of reconciliatory politics between the country's two major political parties.

Ranil Wickremasinghe was appointed Prime Minister in 2001 and with Kumaratunga's backing went in for talks with the LTTE. A cease-fire was declared in April 2002 and the main road linking the rebel controlled north to the rest of the country was opened up for the first time in more than two decades facilitating free movement of people and goods across the country. The peace process was internationally hailed and saw a relatively secure period for minorities and a general economic boom throughout the country.

However by 2003 incidents of violence and cease-fire violations were rising and in 2003 the LTTE formally pulled out of the negotiating process. While the cease-fire was under threat politics in the capital city Colombo was also becoming turbulent. As relations between the President and her government soured Kumaratunga in 2004 dissolved parliament mainly blaming the UNP for poorly handling the peace process. On 23 April Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected as Prime Minister. In August 2005, it was decided by the Sri Lankan Supreme Court that Presidential elections would be held in November 2005. Mahinda Rajapaksa emerged as the fifth executive President of Sri Lanka in a closely contested election. Mahinda Rajapaksa's victory has been attributed to large-scale support from the Southern Sinhala Buddhist voters.

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Governance

Politics in Sri Lanka over the years has been dominated by the question of resolving the rights of minorities, in particular the Tamil population. The conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamils has been the root cause of widespread violations of human rights and ethnic unrest. The future of all Sri Lanka's peoples depends on resolution of the long-running civil war. The conflict between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the LTTE has resulted in an estimated 65,000 deaths and displacement of over a million people.

The inability or unwillingness of successive governments to devise a formula guaranteeing genuine autonomy to minority groups, in particular the Tamils, has initiated communal discord and ethnic unrest. The Kumaratunga government's proposals to devolve power to minority areas was far reaching but did not receive majority political backing and was not implemented. Mahinda Rajapaksa created a similar all-party consultative body, but this forum did not receive support from the opposition UNP and is saddled with basic problems of deciding the status of the country (unitary or federal) and the unit of devolution. Sri Lankan southern political block has also seen a rise in nationalist elements including a

new Buddhist monks' party that managed to secure parliamentary seats. The current government of Mahinda Rajapakshe is also seen as hard-line Sinhala nationalist and his coalition partners include two major nationalist political parties.

Poor human rights record

Sri Lanka's post-independence history has also been marred by several large-scale accounts of human rights violations. The country has a history of state-led brutal human rights assaults indiscriminate of ethnic origin. However minority Tamils and to some extent Muslims have faced targeted human rights violations including extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture of opponents, denial of political aspirations and negation of civil and political rights.

LTTE abuses against minorities

The LTTE has also been responsible for large scale violations against minorities. The rebel group has been proscribed in several countries including the US, EU, UK and India mainly for its terror assaults on civilian targets including the common use of suicide bombers, which the Tigers are reputed to have pioneered. Other large-scale human rights violations by the organization include child conscription, killing and torture of political opponents and 'ethnic cleansing' of Muslims from the north. In one of its most horrendous acts the Tigers in 1990 drove some 70,000 Muslims out of the north of Sri Lanka and many of them continue to remain in displaced camps. The Muslims have particularly been targeted by the Tigers including land grabbing, evictions, killings, torture, abductions and extortion. The rebels are also known for their lack of tolerance of Tamil political opponents.

Since 2004 the cease-fire has slowly broken down and in 2006, the two parties moved onto fully-fledged fighting. The situation was further exacerbated by the split within LTTE itself. Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, 'Colonel Karuna', the eastern commander, broke ranks with the main party on 3 March 2004, claiming neglect and poor treatment of eastern Tamils, and formed the Karuna group and took his soldiers to the government side. Fighting between the two LTTE groups erupted in early April 2004 and continued intermittently for several months leading to large scale human rights abuses. This includes the recruitment of child soldiers by both the LTTE and the Karuna faction, on an average of 50 children every month. By mid 2006 there were 1545 children fighters in the LTTE forces according to UNICEF.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Sri Lanka faces a substantial crisis of human rights and group rights protection. A further catastrophe was visited upon through the Tsunami of 26 December 2004 - effects of this disaster continue to haunt all communities of Sri Lanka. As a consequence of the Tsunami thirty thousand people were killed and over eight hundred thousand displaced. Minorities were significantly affected by the tsunami, far more disproportionately to their population distribution. Ethnic interests and loyalties were pronounced during the aid distribution scheme as well as the recovery and rehabilitation efforts. The 25 years long conflict has seen massacres, abductions and ethnic cleansing and the plantation of about 1 million landmines by both sides, the government troops and the Tigers.

Resumption of fighting

During 2006, with an increasingly worsening political situation, the fragile peace between the LTTE and the government has disintegrated altogether and the country slid back into a civil war in 2006. The

LTTE has reverted to its original demand for an independent state, a demand it had dropped in 2002 following the ceasefire agreement when it settled for regional autonomy.

Since the return to conflict in December 2005 some 4000 people have lost their lives. In August 2006 the Sri Lankan forces and LTTE were locked in battles in eastern Sri Lanka prompted by the rebels' blocking of water supplies to farmers in the east. The Sri Lankan military was successful in securing the area from the rebels and recommenced water. Immediately afterwards, the military pursued a violent and forceful offensive to take-over territory from the rebels in the country's contentious eastern province. In January 2007 the Sri Lankan government announced that it was formally pulling out of the cease-fire agreement. On 16th January, 2007, immediately after the announcement was made, the Scandinavian cease-fire monitors said they would cease operations. MRG in a statement issued on January 11th warned that the latest incidents could lead to more violence and abuses against minorities.

Under the leadership of Vellupillai Prabhakaran the LTTE ran a de-facto state in the north and east of the country that operated from the self-declared capital Kilinochchi in the northern Wanni/Vanni region. The quasi-government disposed over a naval wing and a rudimentary air force that stroke its first bombing raid against an air force base next to Colombo in March 2007.

In July 2007 the government declared they had cleared the entire eastern province from rebel control. More than 250,000 people were displaced in the fighting. Most are in displaced camps. A significant number were returned or resettled but the process was blackened by reports of forcible action taken by the government forces. After capturing the east of the country government troops occupied swathes of LTTE territory in the north in 2008 and finally seized Kilinochchi in early 2009. By February 2009 the Tigers were cornered in a small strip of land in the northeast region around the town of Mullaitivu, a Tamil ethnic minority populous area of 25 square km. MRG called on both the Sri Lankan military and the Tamil Tigers to respect international humanitarian law and protect the lives of the estimated 170000 civilians trapped in the fighting. Since the end of January 2009 at least 2800 people are believed to have been killed, more than 7000 injured and some hundred thousand displaced in the latest round of fighting. According to aid agencies food convoys have not been able to reach people caught up in the fighting and hospitals in the so called 'No Fire Zone' are said not being able to cope with the large numbers of injured that are coming in. According to UN figures, there are only three rudimentary medical facilities dealing with 5000 patients a day; supplies of food, clean water and medicines are running perilously short.

The government rejected demands by the UN and the EU for an immediate ceasefire and for suspending the war to allow civilians to escape. In March 2009 President Mahinda Rajapaksa dismissed the call saying that the LTTE would use the chance to regroup and rearm and said that the war would go on until the Tigers surrendered or were destroyed.

Worsening human rights situation

Sri Lanka's minority communities, especially ethnic Tamils, have been worst affected by the increase human rights violations. 2006 and 2007 have seen hundreds of Tamils being abducted and many of them have disappeared. The same period has seen some 546 killings of which 70 percent of the victims have been Tamils. In December 2006, the government slapped tough new anti-terror laws under which several Tamils have been arrested and detained. Very rarely is information available on the numbers arrested and detained but in February 2007 a government spokesman said 372 Tamils were amongst 452 arrested under these new laws. Thousands of Tamils have also lost their lands and employment to high security zones created by the government.

Many Tamils have also lost their lives or have been abducted and tortured and a result of conflict

between the LTTE and their breakaway Karuna group. In 2006 a special adviser to the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict accused the government of colluding with the Karuna group on child abductions. The government strictly denied this claim.

The International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, a panel convened by Sri Lanka's president in 2006, resigned in March 2008, saying that it could not fulfil its mandate to oversee government investigations of human rights abuses. In the following month, Sri Lanka lost its bid for re-election by the UN General Assembly to membership in the UN Human Rights Council. In June and July 2008, domestic and international journalists and media advocacy groups raised the alarm over the plight of journalists in Sri Lanka, noting that at least 12 had been killed since August 2005. In a plea to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to speak out on journalists' behalf, they noted that earlier in 2008 the Sri Lankan Defense Minister had called journalists 'traitors' for alleged imbalanced reporting of the conflict with the LTTE.

UN diplomats and international human rights organizations have warned that there is a real danger that the latest round of heavy fights in 2008-early 2009 could lead to a bloody denouement to the 25-year old civil war and result in a humanitarian catastrophe. Tens of thousands of people that are caught between the last 1500 fighters of the Tamil Tigers and the 65000 troops of the Sri Lankan army. They are held as human shields and shot by the Tigers when trying to leave, and are shelled by the government army. Both sides deny allegations.

The immense hardship of civilians is worsened by the serious shortage of water, food and medications and by the difficulty of accessing humanitarian access. Humanitarian aid was unable to reach many of those at risk in the north-east region of the country, and in 2007 unlawful killings of humanitarian aid workers was reported. In December, due to human rights concerns the USA suspended military aid to Sri Lanka.

Muslim dimension

The country's Muslims have also had to bare the brunt of increasing human rights violations. Muslims too were displaced in the fighting in 2007. They too continue to be affected by security restrictions including high security zones in the conflict areas. Muslims displaced in the LTTE ethnic cleansing 17 years ago remain in camps and have not been compensated. Muslim lands are also coming under increasing threat mainly to Sinhala nationalist projects. In 2007 Muslims were targeted in a spate of abductions and extortions of businessmen in the capital Colombo and other urban areas. Muslims are also victims of human rights violations committed by the LTTE and Karuna group, including killings, abductions, extortion, intimidation and harassment.

These continuing abuses have been criticised by international human rights bodies as well as Sri Lanka's main donor countries. During 2006, Philip Alston, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Executions condemned the killings and 'disappearances'. Similar concerns were raised by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour. The Co-Chairs of the Tokyo Donor Conference - EU, the US, Japan and Norway - also expressed alarm at the human rights violations. However, as the events of 2007 reflect, no effective response has been formulated by the Sri Lankan government to the concerns raised by the international community on investigating continuous human rights violations.

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