Sri Lanka: Civil War and Ethno-Linguistic Conflict

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The Conflict

The violent civil war on the island of Sri Lanka off the Indian subcontinent reflects the tension between the ethnically, linguistically, and religiously different Sinhalese and Tamils. Nearby India is a major force in political perception in Sri Lanka and periodically intervenes. India's diverse population both mirrors and exacerbates some of Sri Lanka's tensions. From 1987-89 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the Tamil Tigers, or LTTE) fought the Indians and Janatha Virmukthi Peramuna (the People's Liberation Front, or JVP) fought the Sri Lankan army. With the JVP defeated and the Indians out of the country, LTTE and the army fought each other.

Religious

- The Sinhalese are mainly Buddhist; the Tamils are mainly Hindu. Tamils, in the minority, feel discriminated against. There are also other, smaller, religious groups, including Christians and Muslims.

Ethnic

- The Tamils, with a religious language and culture, are a minority within Sri Lanka, a linguistic majority within southern India, and a minority within all of India.
- The Sinhalese, a majority in Sri Lanka, are a linguistic minority in southern India, but a religious majority on the Indian subcontinent.

Political

- Since independence, the government has swung between the conservative UNP (United National Party) and the left-wing People's Liberation Front, though neither has consistently supported the Tamil minority.
- The majority is sporadically afraid that even minor concessions to the minority Tamils will result in the Tamils taking over the government and oppressing the majority.

In April 2000, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, Tamil Tigers, or Tigers) overran the Elephant Pass fortifications at the gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula. They seemed poised to capture the entire peninsula, including the city of Jaffna, capital of northern Sri Lanka, and to reconstitute the secessionist mini-state they had lost five years before. It was an amazing resurgence for the rebels. In contrast, the Sri Lankan army appeared on the brink of a major defeat, losing the gains that it had made nearly five years earlier, when it seized Jaffna. "The army is in a terrible mess and there is no easy way out," said the former Air Chief, Vice-Marshall Harry Goonethileke. The central government had poured in thousands of troops, fortified the bases and claimed it was winning the hearts and minds of the local Tamil population.

The Tigers, who had vowed to retake the peninsula, began an offensive late in 1999. In mid-April they launched a major assault to cut off the Elephant Pass complex that guards the main route linking the peninsula to the mainland. There were some fifteen thousand troops inside the complex, being attacked by one third that number of Tigers, but the troops were unable to hold on and the order came to withdraw. India, which had provided support to the Sri Lanka government at an earlier stage of the war, made it clear in May 2000 that it would not
send its own troops to Sri Lanka; however, the Indian Navy would, if necessary, intervene to evacuate Sri Lankan troops from the Jaffna Peninsula.

In the following months, the military situation became stalemated. The guerrillas were apparently unable to seize Jaffna; the army could not defeat the guerrillas. Consequently, the war dragged on, with devastating effects for the economy and for the living conditions of all Sri Lankans. Human rights violations by both sides continued.

Politically, there was a stalemate of another sort. Government efforts to defuse the conflict by decentralizing power failed to win sufficient support in parliament. The government's inability to fulfill its earlier campaign promise of ending the war appeared likely to lead the electorate to punish it at the polls, and perhaps even to elect a new government less willing to compromise.

**Historical Background**

**The Setting of the Conflict**

Sri Lanka is a pear-shaped island nation in South Asia. From northwest Sri Lanka, the Indian mainland is just thirty-three kilometers (twenty-two miles) away. Sri Lanka's area is 65,610 square kilometers; thus, it is slightly larger than West Virginia and not quite twice the size of Portugal. The island occupies a strategic location near major Indian Ocean sea lanes.

Neutral background material is almost impossible to find concerning Sri Lanka. One group or another contests almost any "fact." Even the name of the country is contentious. Until 1972, Sri Lanka was officially known as Ceylon, an English word derived from the Sanskrit *Simhadaladivipa*, meaning "Island of the Sinhalese." The name of the country in Sinhala and in Pali (language of the Buddhist Scriptures) is Lanka, and the prefix Sri is an honorific. To the Tamils, however, the island is Ilam or Ilankai. (Ilam is spelled Eelam by the nationalists of the LTTE.)

The mere fact that a country has different names in different languages is not a cause or justification of civil war, of course. Europe provides several examples of countries with two names, including Suomi, also known as Finland. In Sri Lanka, however, Tamils saw adoption of the official name Sri Lanka as relegating them to perpetual domination by the Sinhalese.

Sri Lanka's population was estimated at 19,145,000 in 1999 but the precise figure is unknown, in part because of the war. Since the outbreak of hostilities between the government and Tamil separatists in the 1980s, several hundred thousand Tamil civilians have fled the island. As of late 1996, 63,068 were housed in refugee camps in south India, while another thirty to forty thousand lived just outside the Indian camps. More than two hundred thousand Tamils have sought political asylum in the West.

The composition of Sri Lanka's population is another politically charged question. There is a contradiction between the symbolically important binary opposition of Sinhala versus Tamil, and the real ethnic composition of the population, which is more complex. The *CIA World Factbook* (1999) presents three breakdowns—ethnic groups, religions, and languages—without explaining the linkages. According to the *CIA World Factbook*, there are three major ethnic groups: Sinhalese, who comprise seventy-four percent of the population, Tamils, eighteen percent, and Moors, seven percent. Three smaller minorities—Burghers, Malays, and Veddas—make up the remaining one percent. This breakdown also describes the native languages spoken in Sri Lanka. Under religions, the *Factbook* lists Buddhists sixty-nine percent; Hindus, fifteen percent; Christians, eight percent; and Muslims, eight percent.
In fact, there is a considerable degree of congruence between ethnic and religious identities. Thus, the Sinhalese are mainly Buddhists while the majority of Tamils are Hindus. However, the exceptions to this general rule are important. Most of the so-called Moors (Sri Lankan Muslims, as opposed to Malays) are Tamil speakers, yet they deny that the LTTE and other Tamil groups speak for them. Christians include Sinhalese, Tamils, and Burghers (who claim descent from the Dutch colonizers); their political importance is greater than their numbers suggest, since they tend to be of elite status.

Sri Lanka's crisis is particularly intractable because the Sinhalese, like the Tamil and Muslim communities, consider themselves to be a minority in some contexts and thus feel insecure. This is due to the close proximity of India, which often constitutes a frame of reference. Tamils feel that they are victims of discrimination as Tamil-speakers and as Hindus, in a state dominated by Sinhala-speakers and Buddhists. They identify with their fellow Tamils of southern India who constitute a minority within the Indian subcontinent dominated by speakers of Hindi and other Indo-European languages.

From a Sinhalese point of view, however, the Sinhalese constitute a linguistic minority in relation to the much more numerous Tamils of northern Sri Lanka and southern India. In religious terms, the Buddhist Sinhalese are a minority in relation to the Hindu majority of the subcontinent.

As for the Muslims, they are a minority among Tamil speakers and within Sri Lanka as a whole. On a regional level, the hundreds of millions of Muslims of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are outnumbered by the Hindus. As stated by scholar Kenneth Bush, the situation in Sri Lanka and India of interlocking minorities recalls the situation in the British Isles, where Catholics are a minority in Northern Ireland, a majority in the Republic of Ireland and in the island as a whole, but a minority in the British Isles.

**Overview of the Conflict**

The inter-ethnic civil war in the 1980s and the high level of violence since then are rooted in Sri Lanka's transition to independence. Sri Lanka was led to independence by the conservative United National Party, which had been formed prior to the elections of 1947 by representatives of a variety of nationalist and communal parties. Sri Lanka achieved Dominion status in 1948 and independence in 1972. The Sri Lankan constitution conformed to the "Westminster Model,"--the English model--in that the chief of government was the prime minister, whose party held a majority in parliament, and the head of state was the British monarch, represented in Sri Lanka by a governor-general. Although the UNP was dominated by English-educated leaders and included people from all of the island's ethnic groups, the first version of the Tamil question arose under its rule. The issue was the status of the so-called Indian Tamils, who had been brought to the island by the British. Among the earliest acts passed by the House of Representatives were measures denying citizenship to the majority of the Indian Tamils, and disenfranchising them. The political motive behind these acts was the fear by Sinhala leaders of the electoral strength that could be exercised by the Tamil plantation workers, who supposedly sympathized with a communist party.

Economic and cultural grievances fused in the first years of independence to produce a populist Sinhalese nationalism that swept aside the UNP. The economic grievances included falling prices for Sri Lanka's cash crops and rising unemployment for the educated. In the cultural sphere, the UNP was felt to be out of touch with traditional language, art, and religion. In 1956 a left-wing coalition led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the general elections by capitalizing on this populist nationalism.

S.W.R.D. (Solomon) Bandaranaike of the SLFP served as prime minister until 1959, when he was assassinated. His government made Sinhalese the sole official language and took measures for state support of the Buddhist faith and of Sinhala culture. Nationalism was linked to socialism in that the state was given a major role in economic development and promotion of social equality.
Bandaranaike's ethnic nationalism provoked unrest. The small but influential Christian community was alienated by his educational reforms. Far from uniting the Sinhalese community, his religious and cultural reforms alienated various factions. And the violence of the 1980s was foreshadowed when Tamil opposition to the Official Language Act (or Sinhala Only Act, as it was popularly known) led to counter-demonstrations in Sinhala areas. The prime objective of these demonstrations was to oppose any concessions to the Tamils.

Tension erupted in the May 1958 communal riots, the first of a series of Sinhala-Tamil riots and the first major violent conflict in Sri Lanka. The predominantly Tamil Federal Party was outlawed.

Bandaranaike was murdered in 1959. Press accounts have attributed Bandaranaike's murder to a "crazed Buddhist monk." What is more to the point was that Bandaranaike, who had exploited Sinhalese chauvinism to win election, was seen by some as betraying that cause by making conciliatory moves toward the Tamil community.

The premier's widow, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, rode a wave of public sympathy to a landslide victory in the 1960 elections. Her government continued to implement the policies of Sinhala nationalism. All private schools were nationalized, and state-subsidized private schools were abolished because of the dominant position of Christian missions in the educational field. The state pursued the nationalization of economic enterprises.

By 1965 issues of language and religion apparently were less important to Sinhalese voters, and economic issues (unemployment, high prices, and shortages of consumer goods) caused them to turn to the UNP. Minorities, alienated by the Sinhalese nationalism of the Bandaranaike family, supported the UNP. The UNP came to power and Sirimavo Bandaranaike lost her position.

After five years of rule by the conservative UNP, Bandaranaike won the 1970 elections in alliance with Marxist (socialist) parties. Some have attributed Bandaranaike's subsequent move to the left to her personal ties with the Chinese leadership and with the Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. According to scholar Peter Kloos, it is more plausibly a response to domestic pressures, in particular those arising from unemployment among educated youth. In 1971 these domestic pressures would lead to a major insurrection by a predominantly Sinhalese left-wing group, the People's Liberation Front (Janatha Virmukthi Peramuna, or JVP), which nearly toppled the government.

In 1972 Bandaranaike developed a new constitution for the country. The Sinhala name "Sri Lanka" replaced Ceylon. The country became a republic, committed to promoting socialism and the Buddhist religion. Tamil activists charged that the minorities lost rights that had been protected since independence. Young Tamils began to turn to secession (withdrawal from the state) as a goal and armed struggle as a means. Scholar Peter Kloos points out the similarities between the JVP and the LTTE, which he calls "violent youth movements."

Sirimavo Bandaranaike enacted reforms that restricted private enterprise and extended nationalization to a number of private industries and foreign-owned plantations. Imports were banned and many Sri Lankans still remember the long lines for bread and rationing of basic necessities, such as rice and cloth. At the same time that she enacted leftist policies, Bandaranaike used the military to ruthlessly crush the JVP revolt. With the crushing of the rebellion, the small Marxist parties who had been part of Bandaranaike's coalition government began to desert her.

Bandaranaike responded to loss of support by restricting the independent press and by postponing elections for two years. When they were finally held in 1977, her party was reduced to a mere eight seats in the 157-member Parliament, down from ninety in 1970. Bandaranaike managed to win her own seat from her hometown. But in 1980, parliament expelled her, accusing her of misusing power while prime minister, and banned her from holding public office for seven years. In 1977 R. Jayawardene of the UNP became prime minister. In the aftermath of the elections, widespread anti-Tamil rioting took place.
In 1978 Jayawardene pushed through a new constitution, changing the parliamentary form of government to a French-style presidential system, whereby the popularly-elected president is the head of state, chief executive, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Sinhala remained the sole "official language," but Tamil was recognized as a second "national language" that could be used in parliament or in provincial assemblies, as well as in administration in the northern and eastern provinces. Citizens had the right to education in either national language. Jayawardene also banned the LTTE but was unable to end the radical Tamil movement.

The country had been sliding toward civil war since the 1970s, but 1983 stands out as a pivotal point. In that year, the return of the bodies of thirteen soldiers, killed in an ambush by the LTTE, led to an anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo. (A pogrom is an organized massacre.) Far from trying to stop the pogrom, government officials encouraged the killing and destruction. The result of the violence was to weaken the position of moderate Tamils and to reinforce the claim of the LTTE that only it could defend Tamil interests.

By 1987 the escalation of the war was causing large-scale civilian casualties and a flood of refugees to India. The Indian government decided to coerce the Sri Lankan government into halting its offensive by sending supplies to the LTTE. According to Subramanian, instead of easing the crisis, India was drawn into a large-scale military intervention that failed to achieve its objectives.

The Indo-Sri Lankan Peace Accord and War, Again

Under the pressure of Indian aid to the LTTE, the Jayawardene government negotiated the Indo-Sri Lankan accord of July 29, 1987, to establish peace in Sri Lanka. Order was to be maintained by an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). In the first phase, the IPKF was to supervise the surrender of arms by the various militant groups, followed by the formation of the Interim Administrative Council. The council was to include representatives of various groups but the LTTE wanted to dominate the council, and Tamils from rival groups were murdered, as were Sinhalese.

The peace agreement completely collapsed when a group of captured LTTE militants supposedly committed suicide in the custody of the Sri Lankan army, giving the LTTE a pretext for resuming armed struggle. An IPKF post was shelled, a convoy was ambushed, and five unarmed Indian para-commandos were brutally killed. The Indian authorities decided to disarm the LTTE by force. They ordered Operation Pawan, designed to cripple the LTTE by capturing its headquarters in Jaffna City (the Sri Lankan army had been unable to capture LTTE headquarters). The Indians did not use artillery or air support, so as to minimize civilian casualties and material damage. Yet, thanks to sophisticated equipment, including radios capable of intercepting Indian messages and sniper rifles with infrared sights, as well as their ability to mingle with the civilians, the LTTE resisted effectively. It took two weeks of bitter fighting, and many Indian casualties, to capture Jaffna and other northern cities. However, the capture of the cities did not defeat the LTTE, many of whose fighters were able to regroup in the jungle.

The decision of the Jayawardene government to allow Indian intervention caused a surge of patriotism among the Sinhala, which in turn facilitated a revival of the JVP. Thus, from 1987 to 1989, Sri Lanka was the theater of two parallel wars. In the Tamil-speaking areas, the LTTE fought the Indians, while in the Sinhala-speaking areas, the JVP fought the Sri Lankan army. Civil order disappeared. When the JVP threatened to kill wives and children of soldiers and policemen, "secret death squads" began killing JVP members and sympathizers. "Official and unofficial government violence, LTTE and JVP violence, and violence perpetrated to settle private quarrels or for material gain became indistinguishable," according to Kloos. In January 1989, Jayawardene was forced to step down, in favor of his prime minister, Premadasa, who moved to end the intolerable situation.

The JVP leadership was killed in November 1989, which put an end to the war in the south. Premadasa then forced the Indian army to leave. With the JVP and the Indians out of the picture, the two wars became one,
pitting the LTTE against the army. And despite the apparent disparity in strength, the LTTE soon succeeded in carving out a mini-state in the north.

In the aftermath of the Indian intervention, both Indian leader Rajiv Gandhi, who had sent Indian troops to restore order, and Premadasa, who had forced out the Indian troops, died at the hands of LTTE assassins. Gandhi was killed in 1991. That same year, Premadasa survived repeated moves to impeach him by members of his own party (the UNP) as well as by the opposition, on charges of corruption, wiretapping, and authoritarianism. The struggle left the UNP weakened and divided. Premadasa was assassinated on May 1, 1993, by a suspected Tamil separatist suicide bomber who rode a bicycle into the president as he watched a May Day parade in Colombo. On May 7, parliament unanimously elected Prime Minister Dingiri Banda Wijetunga, an ally of Premadasa, president; Wijetunga then appointed Ranil Wickremasinghe as prime minister.

The new president made fresh peace overtures to the LTTE but little progress was made. A parliamentary committee appointed to find a solution to the decade-old ethnic conflict recommended two separate councils for the north and east and a quasi-federal system to meet the rebel demand for an independent homeland. The rebels rejected the offer, and in September nine thousand government troops mounted a major offensive against them. A Tiger sea base in Kilali on the Jaffna Peninsula was captured on October 1, 1993, and the government troops destroyed 120 boats. Despite the loss of Kilali, most of the Jaffna Peninsula remained under LTTE control.

In 1994 Chandrika Kumaratunga, daughter of Solomon and Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was elected president. Her mother became prime minister once again, a post she occupied until August 2000.

Kumaratunga came to power on a platform promising a negotiated settlement of the civil war, increased accountability for past human rights abuses, and an end to government corruption. In January 1995, a cease-fire was declared between the government and the LTTE and the two sides began negotiations. But in April the LTTE broke the cease-fire, sinking two patrol boats and shooting down two troop transport planes. By the time the government unveiled its proposal for a political settlement in August, featuring a plan to devolve central control to regional councils determined in part along ethnic lines, the war was again in full swing. In December, the army captured the city of Jaffna, stronghold of the LTTE. In 1996 the war continued, accompanied by numerous civilian casualties caused by both government forces and the LTTE. Both sides engaged in extra-judicial killings, as did Sinhalese and Muslim guards armed by the Sri Lankan government, and members of Tamil groups opposed to the LTTE.

The government launched a military offensive, nicknamed "Sure Victory," in 1997. Despite the name, the offensive failed to achieve a decisive victory over the LTTE. The Tamil movement responded by a bomb attack in a parking lot in the center of Colombo, in which eighteen people were killed and more than one hundred wounded. As a result of the bomb and the decline of civilian morale, the government offered to stop the military offensive if the LTTE was willing to discuss proposals involving increased autonomy for the regional councils administered by Tamils and Muslims. The government, however, also maintained its basic position regarding the LTTE. The guerrilla group would need to lay down its arms first and agree to arrive at a settlement within a stipulated time frame. These requirements were unacceptable to the LTTE. In April the government and the main opposition, the UNP, agreed to present a common front in negotiations with the LTTE.

Kumaratunga was herself almost killed in an attack by a suspected Tamil Tiger suicide bomber on the final day of campaigning for elections in December 1999. The bomber blew herself up just five meters (sixteen feet) from President Kumaratunga at a rally in Colombo, killing more than twenty people. The president was blinded in her right eye, and used the occasion to address the nation twice--first on radio and then on television where she appeared with a white patch on her eye. She went on to be re-elected for a second successive term as Sri Lanka's president.
Recent History and the Future

In August 2000, with the war apparently stalemate, the Sri Lankan government turned to constitutional revision as a means of ending the conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The draft constitution would have devolved powers to the regions, including one administered by minority Tamils, in an effort to give the Tamils a political alternative to the separatist LTTE rebels. An interim council would have administered the north and east, which the LTTE claims as a Tamil homeland.

Unfortunately for the cause of peace, the attempt to revise the constitution failed, at least for the time being. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's ruling People's Alliance needed a two-thirds majority--150 votes in the 225-member parliament--to push through its new constitution. The government expressed confidence that it could muster the two-thirds vote, even without support from the main opposition United National Party. A government minister said the UNP's full support was not needed, as several of its members of parliament were ready to break away and back the government proposal. Several small, moderate Tamil parties also were supporting the new constitution.

Once the reform was approved, the government would then approach the LTTE for negotiations, even though the rebels have said in the past that they would not agree to talks until they recaptured their former stronghold of Jaffna. Kumaratunga told parliament, "I have a little hope that the LTTE will finally understand the realities of the situation and agree to talks." She was booed by UNP lawmakers, who heckled her and tore copies of the new constitution.

The current parliament's six-year term was to end later in August, and elections would be required. In a move to attract UNP lawmakers to its side, the government approved electoral reforms to replace the current proportional representation system. A statement announcing the decision did not give details, but local media said the changes would increase the number of seats in parliament, allowing the government to accommodate breakaway UNP lawmakers in the next elections.

The UNP, after a meeting of its parliamentary group, said that it would withdraw from the debate on the constitution as it contained proposals contrary to a consensus reached with the government earlier this year. The party said that it also opposed the extension of the executive presidency that would keep Kumaratunga in place for another six years. The UNP wanted the presidency to be abolished immediately. The government wanted Kumaratunga to continue as president during the transition to the new constitution, which would become law only if approved in a referendum.

Beyond these disagreements, typical of the parliamentary sparring between the UNP and the SLFP since the 1950s, there was another sort of opposition. Influential Buddhist clergy and Sinhala nationalist groups opposed the new constitution, which in their opinion was not in the interests of the majority Sinhalese and could lead to the break up of the country. Some monks threatened to go on a hunger strike if the government went ahead with the reforms.

In the end, the draft constitution was not approved. The government fell short by about ten votes of reaching the two-thirds majority needed. In the aftermath, Prime Minister Bandaranaike resigned, and several other ministers were replaced. Fighting resumed.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the constitutional revision project, the state-run media linked the opposition leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, to a series of extra-judicial killings twelve years earlier. The allegations were made by a former senior police officer who said Wickremesinghe had links with groups involved in the suppression of a rebellion by the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna party in the late 1980s. Official sources said that there was a possibility that Wickremesinghe could be arrested. His United National Party accused the...
government of a conspiracy to implicate their leader in torture and murder allegations instead of challenging him in an election.

When five JVP members were attacked and one was killed, Wickremesinghe joined a spokesman of the JVP, Wimal Weerawansa, in blaming the government. Wickremasinghe said he was worried that the upcoming election would not be free and fair. The winner of the election, whether the UNP or the Popular Alliance, would face the problem of finding a way out of Sri Lanka's long war. It remains unclear whether the devolution of power, proposed in various forms since the eighties, is a solution. Such a reform may be both too much for hard-liners among the Sinhalese Buddhists, and too little for the hard-line Tamils of the LTTE.

Chronology

- **1948** Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) becomes a Dominion. The Ceylon Citizenship Act is passed and Tamils lose citizenship.
- **1956** Sinhala is declared the only official language. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) wins the general elections, and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike serves as prime minister.
- **1959** S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike is assassinated.
- **1960** S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's widow, Sirimavo Bandaranaike is elected prime minister. She continues the policies of Sinhala nationalism.
- **1965** The United National Party gains power. Sirimavo Bandaranaike loses power.
- **1972** Sri Lanka gains independence and a new constitution; the name is officially changed to Sri Lanka.
- **1977** R. Jayawardene becomes prime minister and makes some concessions to the Tamil minority, including the recognition of Tamil as a second national language.
- **1983** Widespread violence (and anti-Tamil pogroms) is waged against Tamils following a LTTE ambush and the killing of thirteen soldiers.
- **1987** The short-lived Indo-Sri Lanka peace accords that attempt to establish peace in Sri Lanka occur. An Indian Peace Keeping Force is established. When the peace accords do not hold, India attempts to disarm the rebels by force. For the next two years, the LTTE fights the Indians and the JVP fights the Sri Lankan army.
- **1989** After the Indians withdraw from Sri Lanka and the JVP leadership is destroyed, LTTE and the Sri Lankan army fight each other.
- **1991** Indian leader Rajiv Gandhi is assassinated by a LTTE assassin.
- **1993** Sri Lankan Prime Minister Premadasa is assassinated by a LTTE assassin.
- **1994** S.W.R.D. and Sirimavo Bandaranaike's daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, is elected president.
- **1999** President Kumaratunga is almost killed in a Tamil Tiger suicide attack that kills more than twenty people.
- **2000** The Tamil Tigers overrun the fortifications at the gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula. The army and the Tamil Tigers battle.

Biography

The Bandaranaike Family

The Bandaranaike family has been part of the Sri Lankan leadership for almost seventy years. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (1988-1959) and Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1916- ) both served as prime minister. Their daughter, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (1945- ), is the current Sri Lankan president.
Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike was born into a prominent Ceylonese family on January 8, 1899, in Colombo. He was educated in Britain at the University of Oxford. In 1931 Bandaranaike was elected to the State Council, which consisted of British-educated Ceylonese. In 1940 he married Sirimavo Ratwatte, and they began a family. Daughter Chandrika was born in 1945, followed by their son, Anura, in 1949.

Bandaranaike was elected to the new House of Representatives in 1947, as a member of the United National Party (UNP), and appointed as minister of health and local government. After Ceylon's independence in 1948, he grew dissatisfied with the Western-oriented UPN, and resigned his positions with the party and the government in 1951. He founded the nationalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party and was re-elected to the legislature in 1952. Over the next few years, Bandaranaike formed a coalition party, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (People's United Front, or MEP), which won a landslide victory in the next elections. He became prime minister April 12, 1956. As prime minister, he promoted Socialist economic policies, neutrality in international affairs, Sinhalese nationalism, and Buddhism, to which he had recently converted. On September 25, 1959, Bandaranaike was shot by a disgruntled monk and died the next day.

Following her husband's assassination in 1959, Sirimavo was chosen to lead the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Following the July 1960 elections, she became the world's first female prime minister. Her policies continued her husband's socialist economic programs, nationalization of resources and schools, and international neutrality. She continued to promote Buddhism and Sinhalese nationalism, which alienated the island's Tamil population. An economic recession eroded her political support, and she was voted out of office in 1965.

She returned to office in 1970, when a socialist coalition government regained power. During this tenure, she introduced a new constitution that renamed Ceylon as Sri Lanka, and created an executive presidency. She also introduced land reform and further nationalized industry. However, once again the country suffered from economic stagnation and mounting ethnic strife, and she was removed from office in 1977. In 1980 she was stripped of her political rights by the Sri Lankan parliament, but these were restored by executive pardon in 1986. She returned to parliament in 1989, and served again as prime minister from 1994 until her retirement in 2000. She died several months later.

Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is the current president of Sri Lanka. She was born in Colombo in 1945, and educated in Europe; she earned her doctorate in political science at the Sorbonne in Paris. After graduation, she returned to Sri Lanka but dropped out of political life after she married actor Vijaya Kumaratunga in 1978. Vijaya Kumaratunga was assassinated in 1988, which prompted Chandrika's return to politics. She took over leadership of the SLFP, which frustrated the aspirations of her brother, Anura, who left the party to join the rival UNP. Kumaratunga was first elected prime minister in 1990. She won the presidential election of 1994, at which time her mother was appointed prime minister. Throughout her tenures as head-of-state, Sri Lanka continued to suffer violent ethnic strife, which erupted into civil war by the mid-1990s. Although she once proposed a new constitution that would grant more political power to Tamils, her narrow re-election in 1999 was based on a platform of ending negotiations with the Tamil separatists and continued military spending. Her brother Anura, who serves in the legislature, continues to lead the UNP and is considered one of her chief political rivals.

-- Thomas Turner