
Tamil National Struggle in Sri Lanka - Where did it go wrong? Part I

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Were mistakes made only by the Sinhalese? by Victor IvanThe Sri Lankan Government has been able to defeat militarily, the armed struggle waged by the LTTE. This has caused surprise and shock not only among the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, but also among Tamil people the world over. Earlier, none of them thought the LTTE could be defeated militarily. It had the capacity to safe-guard its existence in any kind of arduous war situation. It was also rated as the first among the separatist terrorist movements in the world. In spite of the fact that the movement is so very ruthless and cruel, its invincibility at the military level, ingrained a certain dignity in the spirit of the Tamils.

Most probably, when favouring Mahinda over Ranil, Prabhakaran may not have thought that Mahinda would turn out to be their grave digger. Prabhakaran envisaged Mahinda as a useless leader who did not possess a strong vision or a definite course of action and hence, could be used easily to achieve his objectives. But, Mahinda is the person who irreversibly defeated the movement of Prabhakaran who was victorious until then. Looking backThe objective of this article is to examine at which point the Tamil National Struggle in Sri Lanka started going wrong. Not only Sri Lankan Tamils, but the Tamils throughout the world never believed that Prabhakaran and his movement could be defeated until it actually happened. They are still in a daze, unable to believe how such a defeat came about, They are in a state of anger not only towards the Mahinda Rajapaksha Government, but towards the entire Sinhala community. This attitude is not conducive to the common benefit and the Tamil people should adopt a stand where they could consider the issues in a calm and logical manner. Have mistakes been committed only by the Sinhalese? Were there no mistakes committed by themselves? The Tamil people should think of such issues. Even though the Tamil National Movement of Sri Lanka can be reckoned a movement with exceptional courage, it cannot be considered a movement with a correct vision, before and after it adopted the path of armed struggle. They never had the decency to rectify grave mistakes committed by themselves. It was a movement which had fantastic dreams that were not realistic. It had the strength to shake the world. But it did not have the wisdom to change strategies when appropriate. Their aims and objectives were utopian. Even when they realised that their goals were unrealistic, they did not have the flexibility to change. Hence, in a broad sense, it was a movement which was destined to be destroyed and defeated by someone, someday. In reality, the Tamil national struggle in Sri Lanka cannot be considered a movement that forged ahead due to injustices against the Tamils by the Sinhalese or as a course of action to eliminate those injustices. The injustices caused by the Sinhala people was only one factor that gave additional strength to the Tamil struggle. The foremost injustice caused by the Sinhala people to the Tamil people is the Sinhala Official Language Act. Even though an amendment ensuring the rightful use of Tamil language was approved after the ’58 ethnic riots, there were no steps taken to bring these regulations into practice.The Sinhala Official Language policy deprived the Tamil people in the North and East of the right to deal with government institutions in the Tamil language they know. It also limited their opportunities to join the government service.The policy of standardisation which was brought into effect in 1972, for entry to Universities angered the Tamil youth more than the Sinhala Official Language policy. There was a conspicuous reduction in Tamil participation in the Science and Technology courses in the Universities due to the policy of standardisation. During this period, the situation was such in the North and East regions that there was an abundance of student demonstrations and agitations by Tamil youth against the policy of standardisation. This was the first factor which facilitated the transition of a growing political tendency for a separate state among the Tamil people to the path of armed struggle. Apart from this, there were other factors which influenced the Tamil National struggle. The quota entitlement in political representation, back in the nineteenth century, was the first factor that became a bone of contention between the Sinhala and Tamil people.RepresentationIn order to restrict the autocratic powers vested in the Governor, an Executive and a Legislative Council system was first established in the country through the Colebrook Reforms in 1834. The Legislative Council comprised of nine official members selected by the Governor himself and six ex-officio members. Of the six ex–officio members, three were Europeans. The other three were selected from the Burgher, Sinhala and Tamil communities which represented Lankan society. This State Council can be considered the primary stage of the institutional system which later evolved into a parliamentary system. In deciding the number of ex-officio members in the Legislative Council, consideration was given to the main communities that were identified ethnic-wise for representation in the council. The number of representatives was not decided by the quantum of population in each ethnic community.The following was the community wise population distribution in Sri Lanka in 1901.Of the total population of Tamils at that time, 49% were Lankan Tamils while 51% were Indian Tamils. Of the total Moor population, 91% were Ceylon Moors and 9% were Indian Moors. Accordingly, of the Tamil population, 485,387 were Ceylon Tamils and their national population ratio was 13.61%. The Ceylon Moor population was 207,510 and their national population ratio was 5.81%.With the changing times, the Legislative Council should have changed. At the beginning it was limited to only three local communities.Later, in 1889, it was expanded to include an up country Sinhala representative and a Muslim representative. By 1917, the number of ex-officio representatives of local communities were as follows:At the time the Lanka Jathika Sangamaya was founded, the general opinion of the leaders who represented all the communities was that this Legislative Council should be further expanded. However there was no consensus between the Sinhala and Tamil leaders on the fundamentals of appointing representatives to the Legislative Council which had to be reformed enabling a much more comprehensive representation. Sinhala leaders wanted a territorial representation system. But Tamil leaders did not agree. What they wanted was the existing system with a 3:2 ratio.On this question, the way of thinking of the Sinhala leaders was justifiable while that of Tamil leaders was not. To a Legislative Council which was now in the process of being converted to a modern Parliament, peoples’ representatives should be elected according to the number of voters. In such a system, it is unavoidable that the majority community will get majority representation. Hence, if there was any suspicion that the majority community would lord it over the minority communities

and that justice would not prevail, what the minority leaders should have done was not to call for the limitation of majority community representation, but to work out a system which will not lead to the limitation of the rights of the minorities even in the context of the legislature being dominated by the majority community. But, the Tamil leaders lacked such a vision and they continued to agitate for the limiting of Sinhala representation so that it will not surpass Tamil representation. After 1921 and up to the time of the Soulbury Commission, the request of the Tamil leaders was that they should be entitled to representation on a 3:2 ratio basis. Due to this stand, Tamil leaders were against self rule when they appeared before the Donoughmore Commission. At this instance, Ponnambalam Ramanathan stated that the powers vested in the Governor should not be changed at any cost and that the grant of three ministries is quite sufficient at this juncture. He further stated that as territorial representation does not grant the justice, ethnic representation should be continued further. W. Doraisamy, the leader of the Jaffna Association, in his evidence stated that ethnic representation though not the best of options, should be protected. Demand for self rule However, the Donoughmore Commission was vehemently against electing representatives on an ethnic basis. While branding such system a deadly cancer in the body politic, they emphasised the need to abolish the ethnic representation system as it creates suspicion and hatred among the various communities and deters the formation of a united nation within the country. The new system of territorial representation recommended by the Donoughmore Commission had an assigned number of 12 seats for minorities including Europeans. G.G. Ponnambalam, Leader of the Tamil Congress who appeared before the Soulbury Commission favoured balanced representation. His opinion was that the Legislative Council should be so constituted that there is no room for one community to override another. He stated that while exactly half of the seats of the Legislative Council should be given to the Sinhala people, the other half should be given to the minorities. The Soulbury Commission was of the opinion that the ideas put forward by Ponnambalam were infected with racist germs. The Commission was also of the view that it had not been proved with sufficient evidence that the majority discriminates against the minorities. The Commission recommended a representative system with provisions made for the minorities, but leaving no room for a racial representative system. The Sinhala leaders always stood for such a system. Accordingly Tamil people received representation which exceeded the ratio of their population. Finally the Tamil members of the State Council voted in favour of the Soulbury reforms (two Indian Tamil representatives and one Sinhala representative voted against the proposed Constitution). But it cannot be said that the dissatisfaction among the Tamil leaders was totally quenched. The Federal Party under the leadership of Chelvanayagam was founded in 1949, six years before the Official Language Act was approved. In its first convention held in 1951, it was resolved that there should be established two states based on language with separate legislative councils under the Central Government. Administrative authority for activities such as Education, Health, Agriculture, Industries, Law and Order should be entrusted to these two legislative councils. By these statements, it is evident that the Tamil Leaders clamoured for self rule not after the injustices were perpetrated on them by the Sinhala people, but before any such thing happened. I do not say that there is anything wrong in that. But it is wrong to say that self rule was sought after injustices were done to them by the Sinhala people. However injustices perpetrated on the Tamil people at a later stage motivated the Tamil people to accept the cry of Tamil leaders for self rule. The mistake that occurred was that without taking action to overcome the precise injustices, the struggle shifted to achieving self rule. By this means, a minor thing which could have been easily settled, developed in to a major issue. Courtesy: Island.lk