

## **A comparison of the role that ethnic nationalism has played in Rwandan and Sri Lankan conflicts**

By Madigan Paine for HIS240: Nationalism and Identity in the 20th Century: Themes and Tensions

“The violence of the violated is never a matter of choice, but a symptom of choicelessness – and often it is a violence that takes on a life of its own and becomes distorted and self-defeating” A. SIVANANDAN

Civil conflict is a deadly yet intriguing feature of human history. It is a conflict that can pit neighbours, friends, and families against one another overnight. When a civil conflict has ethnic undertones, ethnicity – an inherited social marker – determines who fights for whom. Ethnic nationalism has a significant contribution to the origin, nature and outcome of civil conflicts. The Sri Lankan Civil War between the Sinhalese majority and the secessionist Tamil minority provides an example of ethnic nationalism provoking civil war. Sinhalese state hegemony and the cultural repression of Tamils engendered a separatist movement that resulted in innumerable civilian deaths and no Tamil Eelam. The Rwandan Genocide of Tutsis at the hand of the majority Hutus illustrates how institutionalised ethnic division can allow for the rapid mobilisation of an ethnic group for the purposes of ethnic elimination. Both cases experienced the politicisation of identity by colonisers, the scramble for power after independence and the institutionalisation of a majority ethnic hegemony. However, differences exist in the nature and outcome of the conflicts.

Civil conflict varies in the form it takes and the result it achieves. Therefore, it is imperative to distinguish and specify the conflict to be analysed. Brown (2006) states that internal conflict presents loosely in three forms: criminal assaults on state sovereignty – mostly related to drug traffickers and other criminal enterprises, ideological; and ethnic. Ideological conflict involves the struggle for power between the state and the rebel group. Further, ideological identities are malleable and can be won or lost (Kaufmann 2006). Conversely, ethnic conflict is the struggle for power between one distinct ethnic group and another (Kaufmann 2006). Unlike ideological conflict, ethnic loyalty is pre-determined by birth and identity is rigid (Kaufmann 2006). According to Smith (1987), an ethnicity must have a collective name, history and culture, a common myth of origin, a territorial affinity and a definitive sense of unity. Moreover, shared language, descent and self-categorisation are crucial to ethnic identity (Spira 2004). Thus,

ethnicity undeniably informs the self-concept of its people and shapes their world views (Smith 1987). Ethnic identification and ethnic nations have emerged increasingly in response to modernity and the growing awareness of others (Conner 1994).

An understanding of the nation and nationalism allows for a deeper understanding of the processes that lead to conflict, specifically when it's related to ethnicity. Benedict Anderson, a twentieth century historical theorist, offered the definition of a nation as an "imagined political community". He contended that it is a socially constructed community of individuals that are connected, although imaginarily, through deep social ties (1983). Smith (2004) counters this definition, as he believes that it is inherently territorial and does not account for the ethnic nation which is a nation formed from the politicisation of pre-existing ethnic ties. Additionally, it is important to distinguish between the nation and the state—the state is a jurisdictional, political and territorial unit and can exist without a nation, likewise a nation can exist within a state, beyond the borders of a polity as is the case with many ethnic nations (Nesiah 2001). Nationalism, then, is the expression of the nation by individuals. Gellner (cited in Smith 2004, p. 58) supposes that nationalism is a doctrine that legitimises the sovereignty of a group who share cultural, linguistic and historical ties. De Votta (2005) denotes that nationalism is a political movement by members of a cultural or ethnic group who are unfalteringly loyal to their community, and desire their own state. This explanation, however, ostensibly infers the compulsory aspiration for an autonomous state. An appropriate explanation of nationalism is thus: the loyalty of an individual to their imagined political community and the desire to establish legitimacy and protection for their group and their characteristics which is applicable to both territorial and ethnic nations.

The British arrived and settled the island of Sri Lanka in 1815. Prior to British colonisation, a Tamil kingdom dominated the north, while the Sinhalese Buddhist's Kandy Kingdom existed in the south (Schrikker 2007). To assert their political and economic control, they employed a divide and rule model (Sivanandan 1984). The British dispossessed the Sinhalese peasantry through the establishment of tea plantations. The tea plantations were worked by indentured Tamil labourers from nearby South India (Schrikker 2007). The northern, primarily Tamil region of the island was unsuitable for agriculture, so many of its inhabitants become educated bureaucrats working in administration or commercial pursuits (Sivanandan 1984). The Sinhalese, native Tamils and Indian Tamils were rarely in contact with another and thus, conflict and resistance to the British control was sporadic and haphazard (DeVotta 2005). The

British asserted hegemony through the officiating of English and preference for the Christian faith. Under British colonisation, the native Tamils who made up approximately 15 per cent of the population, had a disproportionate political representation (Sivanandan 2010). When Sri Lanka was granted independence from the British in 1948, it was a society that was divided and fraught with tension. Tamils were over-represented in the civil service and the Sinhalese urban labourers experienced penury (Sivanandan 1984). The newly formed independent government rendered the Indian Tamil plantation workers illegitimate and, as a result, they were unable to participate politically. This led to an increase in the Sinhalese proportion of the political voice (Nesiah 2001). British colonisation left a fractured and divided society in its wake, making a smooth and successful ride to independence increasingly difficult.

Over the course of Sri Lanka's independence, the divide between ethnic groups grew as the Sinhalese desired increasing control over state institutions. Prime Minister Bandaranaike (1956-1959) used his Sinhalese nationalist allegiance to secure votes and, as a consequence, became a populist embodiment of Sinhalese nationalism (Mulligan 2009). As a result, during his rule, the ethnic majority became increasingly influential over state politics (Bose 1994). DeVotta (2005) termed this phenomenon 'institutional decay', as government institutions and decision making favoured one group over another. This growing ethnic hegemony was evidenced by the Sinhala Only Act, passed by the government in 1958, which identified Sinhalese as the official language (Mulligan 2009). The government justified this decision under the premise of distancing Sri Lanka from its colonial past, and to give the Sinhalese majority a voice in which to participate in government affairs (Hennayake 1992). This caused anguish amongst the Tamil community, however, as they felt that their language and culture was at risk of being lost (Sivanandan 2010). This period was characterised by rising sentiments of both Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic nationalism. Bose (1994) argued that as Sinhalese hegemony was increasingly enforced, Tamils transformed from an ethnic group into an ethnic nation. The ongoing repression of the Tamil identity by their own government led to the inception and mobilisation of Tamil nationalism (Mulligan 2009). Tamil and Sinhalese nationalism appears cyclical, in that as oppression of the Tamils increased, the desire of the Tamils for an autonomous nation increased, which decreased the autonomy given by the state to the Tamils, which increased their desire (Bose 1994). Tamil nationalism is a direct product of the marginalisation policies enacted by the Sinhalese state (Bose 1994). The animosity festering between the Sinhalese and the Tamils eventually manifested into acts of political violence.

In 1978, the newly elected Sri Lankan government provisionally amended the constitution to concede limited rights to Tamils and minorities (Stokke 1998). The concession was made to secure minority support in the next election, however, its implementation was inconclusive. Due to this concession, hostility, resentment and armed violence against the Tamils heightened at the grass-roots level (Nesiah 2001). During this time, The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) formed in response, consisting primarily of educated, disenfranchised youth (Mason 2003). Political violence against the Tamils culminated in 1983, when state sponsored anti-Tamil riots engulfed the country (Uyangoda 2007). The pogrom was brutal, killing nearly 20,000 Tamil people and displacing thousands, both locally and internationally – creating a Tamil diaspora (Uyangoda 2007). The government's role in the riots was apparent and the response to the riots was even more incriminating – Tamil political representation was eliminated and rioters were supported (DeVotta 2005). The pogrom was pivotal, it transformed the nature of Tamil nationalism from one of moderate faith and belief in the political process, to an utterly disenfranchised separatist organisation (DeVotta 2005). It became apparent that the state was disinterested in delivering any concessions to the Tamils which fuelled support for the LTTE and the establishment of an autonomous Tamil Eelam (Mason 2003). The mobilisation of Tamils became widespread as the Sinhalese military and police relentlessly attacked Tamil civilians (Mason 2003). Sri Lanka had entered into civil war. The war raged between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority for twenty-five years and resulted in between 40,000 and 100,000 casualties (Mahr 2013). The war ended in 2009 as the Sri Lankan military defeated the LTTE – no Tamil Eelam had been established (Mahr 2013). Persistent denial of Tamil legitimacy by the Sinhalese dominated state, led to a brutal separatist movement and the death of thousands of civilians on both sides of the war.

Animosity along ethnic lines is a relatively modern phenomenon in Rwanda. Prior to German colonisation in 1895, the Tutsi and Hutu identities were not especially ethnic (White 2009). Tutsis and Hutus spoke the same language and inhabited the same geographical region – the Tutsi and Hutu categories denoted to occupation and position in society rather than physical, social or cultural differences (Mamdani 2002). The Tutsi minority were pastoralists associated with power and dominated the Hutu agriculturalist peasantry (Wood 2001). However, due to their provisional nature, identities were unfixed as intermarriages and class changes occurred frequently (Mason 2003). When the Germans arrived in 1895, they exploited the existing hierarchal structure and instated Tutsis as their colonial administrators (Umutesi 2006). After World War I, Rwanda was deemed a Belgian mandate and the divide between Tutsis and Hutus escalated (Badru 2010). The Belgians implemented a system of indirect rule; they, like the

Germans, appointed Tutsis to administrative roles and provided them with European educations (de Heusch 1995). The colonisers further demarcated identity through the issuance of identification cards (Mamdani 2002). Moreover, they bolstered origin myths by proclaiming Hutu's indigeneity as Bantu and the Tutsi's superiority as African-European Hamites (de Heusch 1995). This historical fallacy was institutionalised through education and history books (White 2009). Under the Belgian rule, privilege, wealth and dominance were associated with Tutsis, as they were allied with the colonial elite (White 2009). Colonisation's role in construction of ethnic identity in Rwanda is therefore undeniable.

An uprising of Hutu peasants against the Belgian and Tutsi rulers led to Rwanda's independence in 1959 and the installation of a Hutu dominated government (Wood 2001). The division instituted by colonisation was perpetuated, inversely, by the new Hutu government, as Tutsis were prohibited from employment in administration and the public sector, and from accessing education and intermarriage (White 2009). The Hutu elite ensured that divisive identities remained, as they retained the Belgian-conceived identification cards (Wood 2001). These were used to prevent entry into government and military employment (White 2009). The institutionalised persecution of Tutsis characterised daily life in post-colonial Rwanda (Hildyard in White 2009, p. 495). The relentless discrimination against the Tutsis led to the exodus of 200,000 Tutsi neighbouring countries, including Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Uganda and Burundi (Badru 2010). The Tutsi diaspora later went on to form the Rwandan Patriot Front (RPF) (Badru 2010). Mamdani (2002) argues that this mass migration created an ethnic group that felt politically homeless as they had been expelled from their territorial homes. During the early 1960s, the disenfranchised Tutsi exiles staged a number of guerrilla invasions, however, they were easily dispelled by Hutu militia (Mason 2003). Such incursions promoted tensions between the ethnicities, as Hutus became increasingly intolerant of Tutsis (Mamdani 2002). In 1973, a coup d'état occurred and the Habyarimana totalitarian regime seized power (White 2009). Under the regime, discrimination against Tutsi people increased as did the totalitarian nature of the ruling party – the Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement (MRND) (Mason 2003). This period of independence in Rwanda was characterised by an inversion of the power structures, political violence and insecurity. These factors created conditions susceptible to ethnic conflict.

In 1990, the RPF invaded Rwanda with hopes to overthrow the Habyarimana regime which had become increasingly discriminate towards both internal and external Tutsi people; refugees

were forbidden to return and political and social policies increasingly favoured Hutu people (Mamdani 2002). The Habyarimana regime retaliated to the invasion by launching death squads aimed at destroying Tutsi civilians. This ironically drove Tutsi people into the arms of the RPF (Mason 2003). Following the 1990 invasion and consequent slaughtering of civilians, the Habyarimana regime faced international pressure to democratise and acknowledge minority rights. This movement was rejected by the Hutu elite (Snyder & Ballentine 2006). At the same time, anti-Tutsi propaganda by Hutu extremists was increasing in the form of print and radio campaigns (Umetsi 2006). Propagandist materials were increasingly perpetuated by the state as freedom of the press was banned (Snyder & Ballentine 2006). As the hate for Tutsis and the RPF intensified, Habyarimana's plane was shot down outside the capital, Kigali, on April 6, 1994 (Umetsi 2006). Within hours, Hutus were mobilised and the mass murder and elimination of Tutsis began. Following independence, the Hutu elite had successfully indoctrinated an ideology of Tutsi hatred, based on colonial memories and falsified myths of origin (Straus 2007). Between April and July of 1994, approximately 750,000 lives were taken in just over 100 days by ruthless *genocidaires* armed with rifles, grenades and machetes (Mason 2003). Tutsi civilians were beheaded, disembowelled, raped, and disposed of by their Hutu neighbours, friends and at times, family (White 2009). The genocide ended in July 1994, when the RPF gained control of the government. They remain in control today. Historical myths disseminated during colonisation and institutionalisation of ethnic hatred provided the conditions for widespread genocide to occur.

The role of ethnic nationalism in the Sri Lankan and Rwandan conflicts is undeniable. Both conflicts share similarities in their colonial origins, perpetuations of ideological and historical myths and the mobilisation of the masses, however, there are distinct differences in terms of conflict goals and outcomes. Colonisation played a significant role in the demarcation of ethnicities in both Sri Lanka and Rwanda. The British instigated an ethnic division of labour by implementing a divide and rule model (Sivanandan 2010). The Tamils were elevated to administration positions not dissimilar to those achieved by the Tutsi under Belgian rule. Both processes of colonisation created a climate of resentment and distrust within the respective Sinhalese and Hutu majorities. Once independence was granted, each formerly oppressed majority made their claim to power. Moreover, each ethnicity used the historical myths propagated by colonisers to establish and maintain their particular nationalist ideology. Snyder and Ballentine (2006) argue that national myths play an important role in the construction of national identity. Myths contain carefully selected pieces of history that aim to emphasise the

characteristics and the destiny of the group (Synder & Ballentine 2006). The Tamils of Sri Lanka associated the northern region of Sri Lanka with their historical Tamil homeland (Hennayake 1992). They wanted autonomy for Tamil Eelam, a demarcated region that was tied historically to Sri Lankan Tamils. Thus, the lengthy Sri Lankan Civil War resulted in a separatist movement. The Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda had inhabited the same region of Africa since time immemorial. There was no distinct division of land between either ethnicity. Therefore, the civil conflict presented in a short-lived genocide, with the final solution being the termination of the alien Tutsi ethnicity (Straus 2007). Although they followed relatively similar stories leading up to civil conflict, there were significant differences in the shapes the conflict took.

Civil conflict is the most heinous of all conflict, as it turns fellow countrymen against one another. It can arise in a number of forms, but its brutality is consistent. The Sri Lankan Civil War occurred after the persistent repression by the Sinhalese-influenced state over the Tamil minority. Colonisation had divided Sri Lankan society, which was left to pick up the pieces following its independence. The previously oppressed Sinhalese exercised repressive policies and politically fuelled violence over the Tamils, which left civilians to secessionist extremists who demanded autonomy. Similarly, Belgian colonisation of Rwanda created ethnic divisions that had otherwise not existed. Prejudice against the Tutsi identity created resentment among the Hutu majority. Thus, when independence was gained, an inversion of power begun. Tutsis were discriminated against and expelled. They returned from their refuge with violence and were met with brutality by Hutu extremists. Both countries experienced the demarcation of identities by colonisation, and both experienced brutal and costly civil conflicts. The form in which the conflicts took differed, however, the tolls for both countries were the same.

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