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SUBJECT

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Tamils in Sri Lanka: Separatism or Compromise?

I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

There are now four roughly-differentiated categories of politically-involved Ceylon Tamils. They are divided by their approach to the future of the Tamil minority within (or without) the nation of Sri Lanka. On a rough continuum from the radicals to those satisfied with the status quo, they range as follows:

(A) The independence fighters. The only formal organization of which we are aware is the Eela Viduthalai Por Eyakam (EVPE - translated variously as the Tamil Youth Revolutionary Front or the Ceylon Independence Struggle Front). To this group is attributed responsibility for the assassination in July 1975 of Jaffna mayor Alfred Duraiyappah and the subsequent murder of at least one village-level government supporter in the Jaffna peninsula.

(B) The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) MP's and other "gradualists". Although now formally committed to a path leading to eventual independence from Sri Lanka, this group is in fact committed to the Parliamentary system and is not likely to encourage violence as a means to their goal unless there is a substantial change in the situation. They are currently planning election and post-election strategy.

(C) Tamils seeking constitutional changes to provide for increased minority rights. One recently-
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organized group falling into this category is the "Tamil-speaking Peoples' Rights Movement," an organization of moderate Tamils, some with government ties and others in opposition, seeking a specific list of 20 reforms.

(D) "Tame" Government Tamils. These are those Tamils who support, or hold office in, the government, and, whatever their private feelings, do not criticize the current minority policies.

While it is difficult to judge the comparative memberships and strengths of these factions, clearly the first has a prominence out of proportion to its strength, because of its violent tactics.

With an election due sometime before September 1977, the major national parties are wooing Tamil support and can be expected to attempt to placate moderates among the Tamils. The 20-point program of the Tamil Rights movement is a convenient starting point for compromise in an effort to attract moderate Tamil support. The TULF is also being wooed by the national parties but the leadership has seen such pre-election moves before and will be very cautious.

II. THE INDEPENDENCE FIGHTERS

A relatively recent addition to the Sri Lanka political scene is an organized body of radical Tamils, dedicated to the liberation of the Tamil-dominated areas of Sri Lanka. Most of this group is youthful and many are unemployed-victims of either the educational "standardisation," (district and language quotas for university admissions) which limits their opportunities for higher education, or of the government's language policies, which limits their chances for employment in government service.

Although undoubtedly small, the group has made a name for itself through its violent activities, the most spectacular of which was the assassination in July 1975 of Jaffna mayor Alfred Duraiyappah, a Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) supporter. Other attacks on government backers in the Jaffna area have followed, including the wounding of C. Arulampalam, District Political Authority and SLFP MP, and the fatal shooting of at least one village-level SLFP supporter. As intimidation, the tactics have worked. Arulampalam and the other SLFP MP in the Jaffna peninsula, A. Thiagarajah, now severely limit their activities in their constituencies, preferring to remain instead in Colombo. The ultimate aim of the terror campaign, according to one source, is to make it impossible for any candidate unacceptable to the radicals to stand for election in the Tamil areas.

The only formal organization of which the Embassy is aware in which these radicals are the controlling element is the Eela Viduthalai Por Eyakam (EVPE - Ceylon Independence Struggle Front or Tamil Youth Revolutionary Front). ([REDACTED] Secret-Not Releasable to Foreign Nationals not Releasable to Contractors or Contractor/ Consultants.) They claim credit for the terrorist attacks described above. Whether or not there are other radical organizations among Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka is unknown. One of the most prominent among presumed members of the EVPE is A. Kandipan, wanted by the police for suspected involvement in the Duraiyappah assassination. He is the son of A. Amirthalingam, another radical and general secretary of the TULF. Kandipan was in school in India in 1975 and got to the United Kingdom on a forged Indian passport where he was reported as having sought political asylum. That request having been rejected, he is now fighting his deportation to India or Sri Lanka. (Interestingly, his flight to the U.K. on an Indian passport is taken by some officials here as an indication of at least passive Indian support for the Sri Lankan Tamil separatists.)

(In both the U.K. and India, Kandipan was aided by overseas Tamil supporters of the separatist cause. Local Tamils are trying to organize an international network of such supporters but the only formal organization outside of Sri Lanka of which we are aware is the Eelam Tamil Association (ETA) based in London. The ETA (919 Garratt Lane, London, SW 17) issued separatist propaganda at the time of the Non-Aligned Conference and managed to induce several British MP's to call attention to the Tamil situation in Parliament.)

In Sri Lanka, the radicals have been slowed down, but not stopped, by the arrest of around 20 of their activists, soon after the Duraiyappah assassination last year. Seven of the detainees (as well as two still at large) have finally been indicted for the murder and will come to trial before a High Court-at-bar, now scheduled to convene November 29, but liable to postponement depending on the outcome of the current Supreme Court appeal of the voiding of the Emergency Regulations under which trials-at-bar were authorized.

III. Tamil United Liberation Front "Gradualists"

Formerly the Tamil United Front, now renamed the Tamil United Liberation Front, and supposedly considering a further name change to the Tamil Liberation Organization, the organization has formally changed its stated goal from seeking autonomy for the north and east in a federal Sri Lanka to advocacy of an eventually independent nation in the Tamil area. With its nucleus in the Federal Party headed by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, the TULF also includes the old

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Tamil Congress, whose primary strength is its long-time leader G.G. Ponnambalam, and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the chief political organization of the one million Indian Tamil plantation workers. The CWC however, without withdrawing from the TULF, has unequivocally detached itself from the demand for a separate state.

The commitment of the other members of the TULF to an eventual Tamil nation can also be seriously questioned. Some no doubt see their demands as an extreme bargaining ploy with which they can try to extract an autonomous northern region or at least recognition of Tamil as a national language equivalent to Sinhala. Others might like to see a separate state but are not willing to resort to open warfare with the Sinhalese. With a few notable exceptions (specifically A. Amirthalingam), the leadership of the TULF is relatively moderate and willing to propagandize in favor of an independent nation but will probably confine itself to non-violence in the near future.

Publicly the TULF has declared itself uninterested in the current debate over whether or not there will be elections as scheduled next year. The leaders' stated rationale is that they are interested only in the independence of their region and not what happens in the south, where both Sinhala-dominated parties will continue to discriminate against them. In fact, though, from a pragmatic point of view, an election could offer opportunities to barter their political support for concessions on issues important to the Tamil community. Opposition leader J. R. Jayewardene as well as Minister of Trade T.B. Ilangaratne from the SLFP have met in recent months with TULF leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, in hopes of evolving some sort of "dialogue" with the Tamils. Chelvanayakam is still at least publicly proclaiming disinterest in deals with other parties, short of meeting the TULF's demand for a separate state. He also knows that his party will almost inevitably pick up some seats in a new election, possibly five or more to add to their present eleven. (TULF election plans will be analyzed in a future airgram.)

IV. Moderates

Most Ceylon Tamils probably fall into the category of moderates. They would agree that they have serious grievances but see themselves as citizens of a united Sri Lanka, rather than a Jaffna-centered mini-state. These moderates are split among the island's many political organizations.

The United National Party (UNP), born in the days before independence when conflicts between the interests of the Sinhala and Tamil communities were not so apparent, has always had a substantial amount of Tamil support, especially in the Colombo area. The UNP

has been the one "national" party which has been able to win seats in Tamil-majority areas. The left parties too - the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party/Moscow wing (CP/M) have always had a following among Tamils, including those in the Jaffna peninsula, stronghold of the TULF. Whatever their brand of Marxism, most LSSP and CP/M members in Jaffna have shared the belief that the future of the Tamil community of Ceylon lies in cooperation with the Sinhala majority. Apart from these mainline Marxist parties, N. Shanmugathasan, head of the small Ceylon Communist Party/Peking wing, and Bala Tampoe, General Secretary of the Ceylon Mercantile Union and head of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary), are two prominent radical Tamils who see their future in national, not regional, politics.

A new organization, formed in June 1976, has as its aim negotiations with the government to redress a long list of grievances now felt by the Tamil minority. Called the Tamil-speaking Peoples' Rights Movement, the loose coalition, with a nucleus of 40 organizers, was condemned by some as a put-up job by the government to allow the Prime Minister to negotiate with a non-aggressive group and assure a Non-Aligned Conference in August uninterrupted by dissident Tamils. In fact, there are some SLEP and CP/M supporters on the list of petitioners and in fact the PM did ostentatiously meet with representatives of the group on the eve of the Non-Aligned Conference.

However, most observers agree that the group is relatively independent and sincerely seeks some kind of compromise between the two currently-polarized positions. The signators to the original resolution (attached as an appendix to this airgram) include representatives of all major parties including a few loosely attached to the TULF. They are respected as leaders of moderate Tamil opinion and include in their number several Tamil-speaking Moslems as well.

Their twenty-point program calls mostly for legislative redress of discrimination against the Tamil. A formal recognition of Tamil as a national language (along with Sinhala) and as the language of administration in the Northern and Eastern Provinces is their primary goal and most of the twenty points deal with the various hardships alleged to be suffered by Tamil speakers.

The TULF pointedly refrains from criticizing the Tamil Rights Movement and in private some Front members will make the point that they are all working toward the same general goals but that the TULF does not believe that the methods of the Tamil Rights Movement will be successful.

The Prime Minister has met twice with representatives of this group, in talks described as "friendly and cordial," and has said the government is considering the proposals that were made. Obviously

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the PM finds this a more congenial group with which to negotiate than the Tamil United Liberation Front. Equally obviously, though, the Tamil-speaking Peoples' Rights Movement speaks only for itself and cannot automatically deliver any substantial segment of the Tamil vote to the ruling party. However, concessions along the lines the Movement has laid out might have the effect of turning more moderate Tamils away from the increasingly radical TULF; this is obviously just what the Prime Minister has in mind.

V. "Tame" (Government) Tamils

This is the head-in-the-sand variety of Tamil politician who considers his personal position within the government to be more important than challenging the status quo. These Tamils are not very influential within their community and generally are not elected officials. They are the prime targets of the would-be terrorists among the radical youth. Former Jaffna mayor Alfred Duraiyappah, assassinated in July 1975, was an archetype. Post and Telecommunications Minister C. Kumarasuriar (an appointed Member of Parliament), C. Arulampalam, Political Authority for Jaffna District (elected to Parliament in 1970 as a member of the Tamil Congress, he later switched to the SLFP), and A. Thiagarajah (like Arulampalam, he was a Tamil Congressman who defected to the SLFP) are three other prominent members of the non-critical school of Tamil opinion. Thiagarajah was recently quoted in the press as calling for a new "Tamil Socialist Party" but what he apparently had in mind was a formal Tamil faction within the SLFP, similar to the present Islamic Socialist Front, loyal to the ruling party.

All of this variety are now somewhat shy of spending much time in the Jaffna peninsula, where they feel threatened by gun-wielding radicals, and they cannot realistically expect to serve in the new National State Assembly to be elected in 1977 (in which, under the new constitution, there will be no appointed members).

VI. Conclusion

It is important to note that, with the exception of the radical fringe, most Tamil politicians in Sri Lanka are more interested in the upcoming elections than in independence and a separate state. It bodes well for the future of a unified Sri Lanka that the great majority of Tamils, despite their grievances against a Sinhalese-dominated government, appears committed now to cooperation, rather than conflict with the majority community.

Nevertheless the Sri Lanka government is left with two major problems involving the Tamils. The first is that the separatist movement has every potential for growth. The radicals are primarily

the youth, who have been hit hardest by the quotas in education and the linguistic barriers to employment. This group of unemployed and alienated Tamils will grow, not shrink, if, as appears likely, the quotas remain in one form or another and the national economy continues to stagnate.

The second problem is one faced by any established government when confronted with a fanatical minority, which the separatist Tamils decidedly are. Such a minority, when violently inclined, can cause far more trouble than their numbers would indicate. It appears that some Tamil radicals are embarked on such a terrorist course, aimed now only at Tamils who are seen as government "collaborators" but with the potential for expansion into more generalized violence.

A general election, expected in 1977, may alter the temporary position of the forces. The Tamil moderates may win some concessions and it is even conceivable that the Federal Party/Tamil United Liberation Front could participate in the government as it did after 1965. But whether any concessions now foreseeable could substantially change the long-term outlook is doubtful. Both the adamancy of the Sinhalese on the language issue and the poor economic and employment prospects will contribute to continued ill-feeling between the two communities and may lead to a gradual shifting of Tamil opinion toward the more extreme solution of separatism for their problems.

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