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BOOK REVIEW

The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy

Asoka Bandarage

London and New York: Routledge, 2009. xiv and 279 pp.
4 maps, 4 diagrams, 41 pp. notes, acronyms, references, and index
$160.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-415-77678-3).

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Asoka Bandarage, who provides a very thorough discussion of the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, relates the particular issues and perspectives of the contending groups to major conflicts occurring elsewhere in the world. Although the following categories are not utilized specifically by Bandarage, this review considers four general principles that apply both to the Sri Lanka situation and to contemporary conflicts elsewhere.

First, when competing groups claim the same land because both have occupied it "traditionally," how far back in history is meaningful? As Bandarage points out, both the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhala (Sinhalese) claim ancient settlement on the island (although neither occupied the land as early as the aboriginal Veddahs). Before the seventeenth century concept of nation-states, various Tamil and Sinhala rulers governed shifting areas, which complicates identifying a "traditional homeland." In addition to the controversy about "traditional" lands, the question about what populations "belong" to particular areas arises. During the colonial period, Britain brought Tamils from India to work in the central highlands of Ceylon. In recent decades the question about the "true" citizenship of these "Indian" Tamils has been controversial. Likewise, there is disagreement about whether recent settlers in newly irrigated areas are upsetting the voting patterns by different ethnic groups.

A second issue concerns how contemporary self-determination is established. That is, what is the appropriate geographic scale for determining the area to be governed by the resident population? As the author explains, the majority (or even plurality) of ethnic residentschanges with geographic scale. In Sri Lanka as a whole, the Sinhala are the major ethnic group;at the provincial level, the Sri Lanka Tamils are the majority in the Northern Province; and at the next smaller areal division, the composition of population differs from district to district, especially in the Eastern Province. The resulting pattern of districts differentiated by a specified criterion, say, ethnicity, forms a complex mosaic of dis-

continuous areal units. In addition to different groups favoring one geographic scale over other, some political parties in Sri Lanka have shifted their positions about supporting or opposing a particular scale, such as occurred when district quotas were proposed.

The selection of meaningful criteria for identifying groups is a third hotly disputed issue. Governmental censuses have differentiated citizens on the basis of ethnicity, and in fact, many observers characterize the contemporary conflict as essentially an ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhala. Bandarage presents overwhelming evidence that political interests of citizens are much more complex than merely ethnicity, and denning them as such is misleading. Controversies arise from differences in language, religion and caste, socioeconomic status, and political positions. Each of these criteria affects the political stance of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers) and the national government.

According to Bandarage, the Tamil language is inappropriate as the sole defining criterion for a forming secessionist state (Tamil Eelam) because, in addition to the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Indian Tamils and Muslim communities also speak that same language.

Although Tamils are predominantly Hindus and most Sinhala are Buddhists, some of the leaders of the Tamil Tigers are Christians;furthermore, dualistic division omits Muslims. Closely related to religion is the role of caste, which has been a major factor in the political strategies for achieving Tamil Eelam. Bandarage explains that high-caste Tamils often ignored the aspirations of the low-caste Tamils, with the former sometimes holding political views closer to those of the high-caste Sinhala. In general, the effects of socioeconomic status permeate most of the country's recent history. It has been primarily the elites within both the Tamil and Sinhala populations who maintained their dominantroles in the development of and reactions to the conflict.

One of the greatest errors in oversimplifying the conflict results from overlooking the diversity of political perspectives within groups. Throughout the book, Bandarage elucidates the complexity of groupings. This is most obvious in the dichotomy between so-called moderates and radicals. Repeatedly during the decades of conflict in Sri Lanka, the moderates, who have sought a settlement through negotiation and nonviolent means, have been marginalized or eliminated. In fact, the LTTE has repeatedly destroyed other Tamil separatist organizations holding slightly different goals. Numerous attempts by one or more Sri Lankan and foreign governments (especially India and Norway) have been foiled by the LTTE, which has been intolerant of other Tamils who have been ready to accept agreements involving the devolution of political power.

The last issue arising from Bandarage's application of the Sri Lankan conflict to others elsewhere considers the impact of war on human rights and international responsibility (i.e., the "Responsibility to Protect"). Does the United Nations have a right or obligation to override the sovereignty of states when genocide or other forms of extreme suppression occur? If so, how are "freedom fighters" differentiated from "terrorists"? In many cases, this is difficult to determine. In the case of Sri Lanka, is the LTTE a terrorist organization (as decreed by several countries) because it maintains an authoritarian rule over the area it controls and persecutes persons who do not agree with its agenda? In contrast, numerous international nongovernmental organizations believe that the LTTE are fighting for the freedom to declare an independent country. If the latter applies, does it follow that ethnic cleansing is a legitimate goal, namely, that a Tamil Eelam should be a land for only Tamils, whereas

the remaining part of Sri Lanka can be a pluralistic society? At the time this book was written, the latter is preferred as documented by election results (favoring devolution within a unitary state) and by residential preferences (i.e., with the majority of Tamils living outside the area claimed by the LTTE).

Only a couple of aspects of this book detract slightly from its value. Although four maps accompany the text, the inclusion of one or more place-name maps would assist most readers in understanding some details. Second, where occasionally the tense shifts within a paragraph it is difficult to ascertain the timing of particular events.

With almost 1,400 footnotes, this is a very scholarly explanation of the conflict in Sri Lanka; furthermore, it relates this particular situation to insurrections in general.

Keywords: ethnicity, political economy, separatist conflict. South Asia.