

The Current Political Situation in Sri Lanka: A Vision for the Future

Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka

Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka is the prime minister of Sri Lanka. This article is adapted from his remarks before the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on March 24, 2008. The session at which he appeared was sponsored by Ms. Reena Pushkarna.

I have been asked if I came to Israel on a shopping spree. In fact, I have come here on a goodwill mission. As I am the first prime minister of Sri Lanka to make an official visit to the State of Israel, I consider it a great privilege to address this distinguished gathering on Sri Lanka's national problem, the present political situation and our vision for the future. I bring the greetings and good wishes of the government and people of Sri Lanka for peace and prosperity in Israel.

Sri Lanka and Israel share many similarities. We are both small nations. Sri Lanka regained its independence in 1948 after nearly 450 years of foreign domination. The State of Israel was established a few months after Sri Lanka's independence. Israel and Sri Lanka have faced many vicissitudes, trials and challenges, but both countries remain democracies with a commitment to the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. We change our governments through fair and free elections—not through bullets. Perhaps the flip side of that is that both countries hold elections too frequently. But it is certainly a sign that we are very vibrant democracies.

Our two countries are both victims of terrorism, which is the biggest challenge faced by the civilized world today. Our two countries are well aware of the ill effects of terrorism and we experienced the trauma of terrorist acts well before 9/11.

We, in Sri Lanka, celebrated sixty years of independence last month. Sixty years is a long span in the life of an ordinary human being but it is a short period in a nation like Sri Lanka with a long history. As a small nation, we can be proud of our achievements in many areas. We managed to safeguard our democratic setup despite many challenges. We have lived with a separatist terrorist threat since 1983 in the north and east of the country. These challenges did not have any major impact on our democratic system of governance.

Our life expectancy and literacy rates are seventy-two years and 92 percent respectively, and the child mortality rate is also very low. We have just graduated from being a developing country to a low-middle income country, but our per capita income is still less than \$1,500. Our human development indicators are, therefore, quite remarkable compared to countries on the same level of development or having higher per capita incomes. The human development index for Sri Lanka, according to the latest UNDP report, is 0.743 and our ranking is ninety-ninth out of 177 countries. Our record in human development has been commended by well-known economists such as Amartya Sen. These impressive human development indicators are due to welfare policies followed by successive governments since independence.

While we are proud of these achievements, we have failed in one area. I am very honest about it and successive governments are responsible for it. We are a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual society. The Sinhalese, speaking a language which has close links with, and roots going back to, the Indo-Germanic group of languages, account for almost 75 percent of the population. The Tamils, speaking a language which belongs to the Dravidian group of languages, constitute about 17 percent of the population. Muslims, who claim to have a separate ethnic identity, account for nearly 8 percent and the rest are small groups. The Buddhists are almost 70 percent and the Tamils are mainly Hindus. Christians, cutting across the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic divide, are around 10 percent of the population. We have failed to mold this mosaic of ethnic communities and religious groups into one integrated and cohesive nation, although these groups have lived for many centuries peacefully interacting with one another. It is, therefore, a question of nation-building in a classic post-colonial situation.

Sri Lanka is an island nation with a long history and a rich cultural heritage. Its recorded history goes back to the fifth century BCE. The introduction of Buddhism in the third century BCE was a landmark in the early history of Sri Lanka, as Buddhism influenced the evolution of the culture and civilization of Sri Lanka. The ancient civilization reached its zenith in the eighth and ninth centuries, when the Sinhalese were able to develop a hydraulic society which had few parallels in the ancient world. There were many foreign invasions, particularly from southern-Indian kingdoms, drawn by the prosperity of the island where agriculture was booming due to the well-developed irrigation system. Despite foreign invasions and foreign occupation, Sri Lanka remained one unit and it was never a divided country.

Western powers were drawn to Sri Lanka by the spice trade, as we were well known as a producer of spices such as cinnamon, pepper and cardamom, for which there was a great demand in Europe as a preservative used during winter months.

The Portuguese came to Sri Lanka in the sixteenth century and they remained for nearly 150 years. Apart from the spice trade, they were interested in converting people to Catholicism. Then came the Dutch, who were interested mainly in trade, although there were some conversions during their rule as well. The British came thereafter and ruled Sri Lanka as a British colony until 1948. The British were interested in Sri Lanka mainly for strategic reasons, as possession of Trincomalee, one of the largest natural harbors in the world, was considered very pivotal for control of India.

The country was administratively unified by the British who introduced some constitutional reforms in 1833. The British developed the plantation economy of the island, first introducing coffee and, later, tea. The British also developed the infrastructure—roads and railways—to serve the interests of the plantation economy and introduced Western educational and medical systems. Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known, was considered a model colony of the British Empire, and constitutional reforms were introduced from time to time as a way of preparing the colony for self-government. In 1931, in a major reform, the universal adult franchise was introduced, Sri Lanka being the first non-white British colony to gain that status.

Under British rule, the minority Tamils enjoyed a privileged position, and they were predominant in government service and in the legal, medical and engineering professions. I cannot say definitely whether the British, as any other colonial power would, followed a divide and rule policy, and it is a debatable point. What is very certain is that they occupied a privileged position quite out of proportion to their share of the population. Of course, they benefited from the educational facilities provided by American missionaries who concentrated on Tamil areas in the Northern Province, centering on Jaffna.

When we regained independence, it was a peaceful transfer of power. We did not experience mass uprisings against the British as in India, such as Mahatma Gandhi's famous salt march and other civil disobedience activities, or in Burma, where there were mass killings. Although it was a peaceful transfer, it was, in fact, a transfer of power from the British to a Western-oriented and English-educated elite. It was described as a transfer of power from the white to the brown sahibs. Following independence, ordinary people did not feel any perceptible change in their lives, as life continued as it had before. The administration of the country and court proceedings were conducted in English, and higher education, which was the passport to gainful employment, was in English. This was so despite the fact that not more than 10 percent of the population spoke and understood English. We were luckier than most other colonies that gained independence at that time, or thereafter. We had large Sterling reserves and the Korean War created boom

conditions, with high demand for our rubber. Sri Lanka was the envy of other Third World countries—Lee Kuan Yew, who passed through Colombo in the mid-1950s, after being educated at Cambridge, regarded Sri Lanka as a model for the development of Singapore.

Within a few years of independence, there was growing clamor for a change in the status quo and for the empowerment of the masses—mainly the Sinhalese majority, who were somewhat sidelined during the colonial rule. This clamor soon turned into a mass movement, which led to a change in government in 1956, for the first time since independence. Ironically, the leader of this movement was a scion of the Western-educated elite, Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who studied Western classics at Oxford University. His victory in the 1956 election resulted in the dawn of the common man's era in Sri Lanka. This change was akin to a social revolution. His government adopted Sinhalese as the official language of Sri Lanka and took many measures to make independence more meaningful to the ordinary people of the country.

The rapid expansion of educational opportunities in Sinhalese areas and the other steps taken to empower the common man—a kind of affirmative action—soon led to fierce competition for posts in public service.

The Tamil minority saw these policy changes as deliberate acts or policies of discrimination directed at them. This was, perhaps, a natural response on the part of a minority when the majority community was nearly 75 percent of the population. The successive governments were cognizant of these grievances. In 1988, Tamil was recognized as an official language.

In the period before independence and in its immediate aftermath, the English-educated and Western-oriented Tamils had much in common with their counterparts in the Sinhala community. They were moderates and mostly Colombo-based professionals. They were wedded to parliamentary democracy and sought solutions to Tamil grievances through peaceful and constitutional means. This process was naturally slow, however, and by the mid-1970s, militant youth emerged in the Tamil community who were impatient and wanted more drastic steps to be taken. In time, they resorted to terrorist activities, targeting moderate Tamil leaders and Tamils holding positions in the police force. By the early 1980s, some of these militant leaders were operating from camps in south India where the local population has close ethnic and cultural connections with the Sri Lanka Tamils. The government that rose to power in 1977 opened up the economy and followed a foreign policy which deviated from the strictly non-aligned policy followed by Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike, the world's first female prime minister. The changes introduced by that government created a certain friction with India.

India not only provided a haven for disgruntled militant Tamil groups in Tamil Nadu, but also provided military training and financial assistance. There were also reports at the same time that some Tamil youths received training in Palestinian camps in Syria and Lebanon.

The Tamil terrorist activities intensified in 1983, when thirteen Sinhalese soldiers were killed in a landmine explosion in Jaffna. The LTTE, which was the largest Tamil militant separatist group, was responsible for this terrorist act. This was the worst terrorist act up to that time involving many casualties, and it triggered a backlash in the south, in the form of communal riots aimed at Tamils living among the Sinhalese, mainly in Colombo and its suburbs. There is reason to believe that some chauvinist groups within the then government were involved in these criminal acts. These riots were a turning point in the history of Sinhalese-Tamil relations, and almost the entire Tamil community, including people holding moderate views, became disenchanted. This resulted in an exodus of many Tamils to southern India and Western countries, such as Canada and Australia, to seek safer pastures. These ethnic tensions received wide publicity in the international media and Sri Lanka's image was tarnished.

Here, certain misconceptions should be highlighted. Since those unfortunate events, the international news agencies began covering developments in Sri Lanka using certain clichés. Sadly, that practice still continues today. A common cliché, for example, is to say that the Tamils, who were mainly Hindus living in the north and east of Sri Lanka, suffered deprivation and discrimination under successive governments dominated by Sinhala Buddhists in the south. This is very misleading, as it can be misconstrued as a religious conflict. Religion has not played any role in this issue.

There is much in common between Buddhism and Hinduism. Many Buddhists visit Hindu temples and there are many religious places where both groups worship in common. This cliché also give the impression that both the north and east of Sri Lanka are predominantly Tamil. This is incorrect. While the north is predominantly Tamil, the Eastern Province is mixed, with people belonging to the three ethnic groups, having almost the same proportions.

Another cliché is that there is a civil war in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese, who are a majority, and the Tamils. This is also misleading, as it gives the impression that there is a kind of tribal conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. There is no such conflict and the two communities interact with one another and even intermarry. The conflict is between the government forces and Tamil terrorist groups that have taken up arms against the democratically elected government.

At the time, several Tamil terrorist groups were active, and they all wanted to establish a separate state in the north and east of Sri Lanka called Tamil Eelam. While waging terrorist activities against the government, these groups were fighting for supremacy. This resulted in severe breaches of law and order, both in Sri Lanka and south India.

The Indian government, under Rajiv Gandhi, used its good offices to arrange direct talks, in July 1985, between representatives of these groups and a Sri Lankan government delegation. The Tamil groups presented their unreasonable demands, which, in effect, amounted to their demanding a separate state.

Two years later, the Indo-Sri Lanka accord was signed. That document provided for the disarming of militant groups and the introduction of an Indian peacekeeping force to oversee the implementation of the accord, which was expected to restore peace to the country. Under the terms of the accord, the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka was introduced. This amendment established provincial councils for devolution of powers to meet the aspirations of minorities. While all militant groups accepted the provisions of the accord and joined mainstream democratic life, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tigers, began fighting with the Indian forces. This resulted in the death of nearly 1,200 Indian soldiers. It was a case of the Frankenstein monster devouring its creator. The LTTE assassinated the former Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, on Indian soil in 1991. While fighting the Indian soldiers, the Tigers entered into direct talks with the then Sri Lankan president in 1989. There is no doubt that the motive of the Tigers in engaging in direct talks was to hasten the withdrawal of Indian troops. With the withdrawal of the Indian peacekeeping force, the Tigers turned against the Sri Lankan government, and President Premadasa was also assassinated by the Tigers in 1993.

The coalition government, led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (to which I belong), came to power in 1994 after seventeen years in the opposition. The government was elected on a peace platform and pledged to seek a political solution to the prevailing problem. We received a clear mandate from the people, who were tired of war. Therefore, we immediately started talks with the Tigers by sending a delegation to Jaffna, which was under their control at the time. We began enthusiastically, but the Tigers, true to form, were pursuing another agenda and recommenced hostilities shortly thereafter. The Tigers' strategy has generally been to sue for peace whenever they are weak, using the period of negotiations to regroup and then recommence their terrorist activities.

Even though it was well aware of the LTTE agenda, their modus operandi and their past track record on negotiations, in 1999 the government decided to seek

the facilitation of Norway to start talks with them, as we were genuinely interested in restoring peace and meeting the aspirations of minorities. We wanted to leave no stone unturned in our quest for peace.

In 2002, Sri Lanka entered into a ceasefire agreement (CFA) with the LTTE under Norwegian facilitation and inducted a Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), consisting of representatives from Scandinavian countries to observe the implementation of the CFA. Whether or not the CFA is a valid legal document is a debatable point, as it was signed by the then prime minister without the approval of the president, who, in our constitutional setup, is head of state and government and commander in chief. The CFA was not submitted for parliamentary approval, either. Six rounds of talks were held with the Tigers in different locations outside Sri Lanka under the facilitation of Norway. It was very clear that the Tigers were not serious about peace and were trying to divert talks from the core issues to trivial ones. The LTTE boycotted the Tokyo Donors Conference, held in June 2003, which was a pledging conference meant to provide momentum and economic underpinnings to the peace process. In addition to Norway, three other parties—the US, Japan and the EU—became involved in Sri Lanka's peace process as co-sponsors.

The CFA was frequently breached by the LTTE—the number of violations they committed, as reported by the SLMM, exceeded 3,000; the violations by the government, on the other hand, amounted to less than 300. The LTTE were involved in political assassinations, which were strictly forbidden in the CFA. The LTTE eliminated many moderate Tamil leaders, including respected leaders such as Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and Neelan Tiruchelvam, a Harvard-educated human rights and constitutional expert, who founded the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. Additionally, they targeted many Sinhalese leaders and several senior army officers.

Despite the scant respect demonstrated by the LTTE for the CFA and the peace process, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who assumed duties after winning the presidential election in November 2005, sent delegations to attend two rounds of talks with the LTTE in Geneva in 2006. The LTTE, however, was not serious. He sent another delegation to Oslo, after Norway declared that that the LTTE would have its own delegation to meet with the government representatives. However, the LTTE refused to meet with the government delegation, citing some trivial reason, again demonstrating that it was not serious about peace.

The LTTE has been waging a terrorist campaign against a democratically elected government for nearly three decades. According to a recent report by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Tamil Tigers are among the most dangerous

and deadly extremists in the world. They belong to the only terrorist organization to have assassinated two world leaders and blinded another in one eye during the attempt to assassinate her. It is a monolithic organization led by a reclusive megalomaniac, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who does not tolerate any dissent within or outside of the group. His aim is to establish a mono-ethnic fascist regime in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

The LTTE claims that it is the sole representative of Tamils, which is a hollow and baseless claim. There are other groups which have joined the mainstream after having given up separatism. The LTTE has never taken part in any election, but has done everything in its power to disrupt elections whenever they have been held in areas in which they operate. Prabhakaran has never personally participated in any peace talks. His devotees blindly follow him, creating a Prabhakaran cult of personality and elevating him to divine status. The LTTE has many units—the Sea Tigers, Black Tigers and the recently added air wing with two light aircraft. The Black Tigers are responsible for suicide operations and have perfected the “art” of suicide bombing and assassinations. It is generally believed that they learned this from Palestinian groups. According to some experts on terrorism, they maintain contacts with other terrorist groups, such as the PKK, Taliban, Islamic groups in the Philippines and even some affiliates of al-Qa’ida. The FBI report correctly stated that their ruthless tactics have inspired terrorist networks worldwide, including al-Qa’ida in Iraq. The LTTE maintains an international network for collecting funds for their terrorist activities and for the procurement of arms. Funds are collected through extortion from the Tamil diaspora, now numbering almost one million in Western Europe, Canada and Australia. They are engaged in narcotics trafficking, human smuggling and money-laundering. The LTTE is banned, or listed as a terrorist organization, in thirty-two countries, including the US, EU, Australia, Canada, India and Malaysia. However, they continue to collect funds through front organizations and other means. They have their own shipping line, used for smuggling arms. Many of their ships have been destroyed by our navy. The LTTE has a “baby brigade,” as well, and it has been condemned by the UN for child conscription on many occasions.

The group will never give up its dream of forming an independent state in the north and east. In fact, Belupillai Prabhakaran wants to set up a Tamil state that would include parts of India, as well.

The division of our small island nation, which has remained a single unit throughout history, is not feasible politically or economically. It should also be borne in mind that India will never allow an independent and separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka, because such a development would have deleterious effects in India, where

there are many separatist groups. India has always been committed to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity.

What is the present situation and what is our vision for the future? We want to restore peace in the country. This is the yearning of the silent majority. This can only be achieved by eliminating terrorism. We are also very conscious of the aspirations of minorities. I should like to emphasize that we are not seeking a military solution but remain very much committed to a political solution. We are essentially following a two-track policy.

The first track involves the launching of military operations to liberate the people of the north and east from the clutches of the terrorists. We have already liberated the Eastern Province and recently, we had free and fair elections for local bodies in the Batticaloa district, which was a stronghold of the LTTE in the past. The voter turnout was almost 60 percent, which is very encouraging. We have launched a special program to rehabilitate and develop the Eastern Province. We will also very soon extend similar support to the people in the north who have been traumatized under the heel of the LTTE. In the north, only two districts are still under terrorist control. Our doors are open for peace talks, although we believe that with the present megalomaniac leadership, we cannot expect to have any meaningful or fruitful talks.

We abrogated the CFA in January, as it was a dead letter and the LTTE was using it as a cover for their heinous crimes. There are many allegations against us by human rights groups, as well as adverse reports from some visiting UN officials. It should be noted that we are conducting a campaign against a ruthless terrorist outfit, and occasionally this results in minor infractions of human rights and random civilian casualties. We are taking adequate precautions to minimize civilian casualties, and our armed forces are being schooled in human rights and international humanitarian law. Last year, a five-year training program in international humanitarian law, in which army personnel participated, was completed. That program was carried out with the assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). There are human rights units in all three branches of the armed forces and in the police. Our critics omit any mention of the positive policies we implement. Civil servants in the areas under terrorist control, although they sometimes follow the dictates of the terrorists, are paid by the government. We maintain schools and hospitals at our expense. We send food, medicine and other essential supplies to these areas at government expense. INGOs and NGOs are allowed to operate there. We are doing all this because we believe that we are responsible for all our citizens, irrespective of whether they live in areas controlled by terrorists. I wonder whether there is any other strife-torn country that provides such assistance to people in rebel-controlled areas.

In fact, many years back, a senior UN envoy commended Sri Lanka for this unique example.

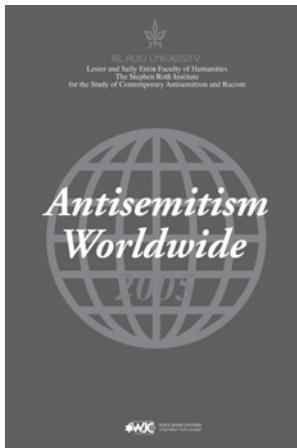
The international community can help us in our fight against terrorism. Terrorism has become a cross-border phenomenon. As I explained, although LTTE is banned in many countries, its agents collect funds using various surreptitious methods. There are several UN conventions on terrorism, including one on the financing of terrorism, under which the member countries have an obligation to stop the collection of funds on their soil for terrorist activities in other countries. If the illegal fundraising activities of the Tigers could be effectively curtailed, and if the smuggled arms could be intercepted, the LTTE would, perhaps, be compelled to consider resuming talks. We are happy that many countries have taken effective action against fundraising by the Tigers for their terrorist activities. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the government and the people of Israel for their support in our fight against terrorists and express the hope that we continue to receive their support.

As for the second track, we are committed to seeking a sustainable political solution that will be acceptable to all communities. The All Party Representative Committee (APRC), which includes many parties represented in Parliament, has had many meetings, and recently submitted its interim report to the president. The APRC has recommended that the provisions of the Thirteenth Amendment be fully implemented while the committee continues its deliberations for further recommendations. The government has accepted the interim report and is now in the process of implementing the recommendations of the committee. The Thirteenth Amendment introduced the provincial council system. It stipulates that there will be provincial councils with elected chief ministers and a council of ministers in each of the nine provinces of Sri Lanka. The system is very similar to the Indian model and we hope that the full implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment will devolve powers to the periphery to satisfy the aspirations of the minorities. The decision of the government to fully implement the Thirteenth Amendment has been commended by India and other countries as a welcome first step toward finding a political solution acceptable to all communities within a united Sri Lanka. More than any other country, India is well informed of our complex situation and the Thirteenth Amendment, which introduced the provincial council system, was the result of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987. After the elections to local bodies in Batticaloa, we will be holding Provincial Council elections in the east in May. Until the situation returns to normalcy in the north and it will be possible to hold elections, we will appoint a separate governor, who will be assisted by an interim advisory committee.

Our vision is to restore peace in the country and prepare the environment for a speedy recovery after three decades of conflict. That conflict has drained resources that could have been used for development purposes. We are spending almost 6 percent of our GDP on military expenditure, which is a high figure by any standard, especially considering that in the period immediately after independence, it was less than 1 percent. We want to create a Sri Lanka where all communities, irrespective of their ethnic origin or religious faith, can live anywhere without fear or concern as equal citizens, and engage in any legal activity without limitations. We believe that the entire country is the traditional homeland of all communities living there; we do not believe in separate homelands for different communities. We have the potential, considering our human resource development and strategic location, to achieve the same economic development as Asian tiger economies.

Very shortly, we will be prospecting for offshore oil in Sri Lanka's territorial waters, with the help of other countries and international companies, as seismic surveys have indicated the presence of oil deposits. We also believe that once we restore peace, we can expect the international community to help us in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of areas affected by the conflict. We Sri Lankans are optimists by nature. I am optimistic and confident that peace will return to Sri Lanka and we can see the light at the end of the tunnel after three lost decades.

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Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of
Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism

Gilman Building,
Tel Aviv University
POB 39040, Ramat Aviv
Tel Aviv 69978
Israel
Tel: 972-3-6408779
Fax: 972-3-6408383
E-mail: anti@post.tau.ac.il
Website: <http://antisemitism.tau.ac.il/>