

Understanding the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamils

Comment

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July 23, 1983, is a day of infamy — a 9/11 if you will — for Sri Lanka's Tamils. The day marks the Sri Lankan government's orchestrated mass killing of over 3,000 members of the country's minority Tamil ethnic group. Tamil homes and businesses were destroyed, and almost one million Tamils went into exile — many in Canada. After witnessing the horrible riot, my father hardly ever spoke about it, but when he did, I listened. He used to say, "When you are engulfed in racial hate, you lose half your IQ."

Ironically, in July, 1983, the then-president of Sri Lanka, J. R. Jayawardene, told Ian Ward of London's Daily Telegraph, "I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna [Tamil] people, now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion ... really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy."

Politicians representing the Sinhalese majority gave the voters list to the rioters so that the Tamil houses could be easily identified. The mobs raped women, put tires around the necks of Tamil men before lighting them on fire and even targeted children. Is it any wonder that Tamil youths took up arms?

Tamils assembled, organized and resisted, first peacefully, then by armed insurrection. The astonishing brutality of the 1983 riots was the tipping point. The inability of the authorities to provide adequate protection against racially motivated attacks prompted moderate Tamils to look toward an armed struggle to restore Tamil nationhood.

Before this armed insurrection, Tamils tried on numerous occasions to gain their rights through democratic means — but to no avail. The 1957 Banda-Chelva Pact, the 1965 Dudley-Chelva Pact and proposals put forward in 1970 by the Tamil Federal Party, a plan that included a federal form of government with an autonomous Tamil-Muslim state and three autonomous Sinhala states: All were unilaterally rejected or abrogated by the government of Sri Lanka.

Tamils tried again on May 15, 1976, at the first National Convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), and passed a resolution that was adopted unanimously by all Tamil political parties. The goal was to find ways to end the incessant persecution of Tamils by successive governments ever since Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948.

The TULF went into the 1977 general elections with this resolution and received an overwhelming 82% support from Tamils for the establishment of a Tamil nation. But the high expectations of Tamils were dashed yet again as the government, true to form, reneged on an agreement to respect the vote, and unleashed violence to terrorize and

subjugate the Tamils. On Aug. 12, 1977, less than a month after the election, Sinhala mobs organized by the government killed over 300 Tamils.

I was born in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo and lived there with my parents until this riot; I was seven at the time. My father was very concerned for the safety of his sons, so he moved us to the north part of the country, along with my mother, and he stayed behind to make a living. From then on, till his death, he became a "commuter father" — and I only saw him a few times a year. I never knew who he was until his untimely, horrific demise 21 years ago.

In the absence of fundamental political change, peace will never be possible in Sri Lanka. Regardless of how one feels about the Tamil Tigers, the plight of the Tamils cannot be ignored. We know the kind of people who deny the Holocaust. What interest anyone has in denying the suffering of Tamils remains to be discovered.

In 1948, when Sri Lanka got its independence, it was considered to be the post-colonial nation most likely to succeed economically and democratically. Unfortunately, since then Sri Lanka has been governed by leaders with a penchant for racial hatred. Through their hatred, they are destroying their country.

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