

Breakdown of the Harmonious Relations that Existed Between Sinhala and Tamil Political Leaderships and the Development of Feelings of Insecurity among the Latter During the 1919-1948 Period: A Historical Analysis

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Background

Westernized Ceylonese elite class leaders had been engaging in political agitation against the British rulers from around the beginning of the 20th Century. This included both Sinhala and Tamil leaders. Even though Tamils were one of the minority communities in Ceylon, Tamil leaders worked shoulder to shoulder with Sinhala leaders for achieving constitutional reforms in Ceylon. The high caste Tamils were treated more favorably by the colonial administration as could be seen by the fact they provided a high standard of English education facilities in the Jaffna peninsula but not in the Sinhala areas. As a result, high caste Jaffna Tamils were able to receive a good English language based education which enabled them to maintain themselves at a higher social level. Due to those advantages the Tamils were able to engage in the forefront of the political agitation movement, ahead of the Sinhala leaders (Silva, 1967, p 90).

During the first two decades of the 20th Century, a remarkable phenomenon was the unity and harmony which prevailed between Sinhala and Tamil leaders. None of the Sinhala or Tamil leaders viewed or wished for anything from the ethnic angle; rather, they focused on reforms that would benefit the whole of Ceylon. Leaders laid emphasis on the common goals, rights and needs of both communities.

But even if unity and harmony prevailed among national leaders around that period, there were no strong national organizations that included all communities in Ceylon. Elite leaders had organized themselves into a variety of separate and rather ineffective organizations. Most probably they had been organized along the lines of the different ethnicities present then. But the 1915 riots and the brutal suppression that followed it created a perfect environment to build up a strong, powerful organization that represented all nationalities in the country. The leadership expected to exert a strong influence over the British rulers through such a powerful, united organization. In respect of that, Ponnambalam Arunachalam who was the most distinguished Tamil leader of that period came forward to persuade the leaders of different ethnicities to work from a common platform. After struggling for several years Arunachlam was able to establish the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) in 1919, which represented every community living in Ceylon. Ponnambalam Arunachalam was automatically selected as the first president of the CNC (Silva, 1972, p 97). At the time CNC was established all elite class leaders fully

subscribed to the twin principles of communal harmony and national unity. Unfortunately though, this unity proved to be short lived.

Research Problem

What gave rise to the feelings of insecurity among Tamil elite class leaders during the pre-independence (1919-1948) period in Ceylon?

Objective

To identify the dominant issues that were responsible for causing insecure feelings among Tamil leaders during the pre-independence years.

Theoretical Underpinning

The following hypothesis is proposed to provide the theoretical underpinning of this research.

‘Security’ is the one of the major issues that is exploited by malevolent influences to create acrimonious feelings among diverse ethnic groups.

Methodology

The data collection mainly depended on secondary sources. Mostly books, research papers, monographs, theses and dissertations were used. Additionally, contemporary newspapers were skimmed through to gather any pertinent information.

Key Findings and Conclusions

The period from 1920 to 1948 was rather significant in respect of the gradual emergence of disagreements between Sinhala and Tamil leaders. Usually, the colonial rulers based the selection of representatives for the Legislative Assembly along communal lines, as that was the Governor’s wish. In order to win the special favor of the Governor, elite class Tamil leaders had more opportunities in the Legislative Assembly. For example, though the Tamils were a minority community they received equal representation (3:3) with Sinhalese in the 1911 constitutional reforms. But the introduction of territorially based representation through the Manning reform (1920) directly contributed to change the balance of power in favor of the majority community by bringing 13 Sinhalese as against three Tamils into the Legislative Assembly (Bandarage, 2009, p 34). As a result, there was a drastic reduction in the Tamil representation, and Tamil members started an immediate campaign to restore the pre-existing ratio between Sinhalese and Tamils. To achieve this, Tamil leaders demanded the special communal seat in the Western Province that had been promised by Sinhala leaders in 1918 (Gunasingham, 1999, p 213). This was the first time in Ceylonese history that Sinhala and Tamil elites had entered into a conflict, in the fight for this special seat. Governor Manning had through direct and indirect machinations caused this problem and also gave intensive encouragement to deliberately develop this dispute among both leaderships (Bandarage, 2009; Silva, 1972; Gunasingham, 1999). He had perceived that the unity of both Sinhala and Tamil leaders that had been solidified by the establishment of the CNC would turn out to be a big threat to the British rule. In the end, Tamil leaders were not able to achieve the special seat in the Western Province, and so Arunachalam and most of the Tamil members left the CNC,

deeply disappointed with Sinhala leaders. Soon after their departure from the CNC the Tamil leaders formed a new organization, the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai (literally, Tamil People's Assembly) in August 1921 to better serve the Tamil community through their political struggle. Since then Tamil leaders have followed different paths at different times in quest of their goals.

In 1931 universal franchise based on the territorial representation method was introduced through the Donoughmore reforms and the communal representation method was abolished. The Donoughmore reforms were strongly criticized by Tamil elites who pointed out that its implementation would directly lead to the creation of Sinhalese dominance in the legislature. Therefore, as a sign of protest they boycotted the election that took place under the Donoughmore reforms. Consequently, the Sinhala leaders obtained the majority in the government, which then came to be known as the Pan-Sinhalese Government.

Following that, Tamil elites were worried about the dominant position of Sinhalese in the Legislative Assembly and began emphasizing the need for 'balanced representation', which came to be known as the 'fifty-fifty scheme' (Russel, 1982, p189). What this meant was the Sinhalese would have 50 percent representation and the minorities would share the remaining 50 percent in any future legislative body. However, as the Sinhalese at the time constituted approximately 70 percent of the population the proposal was rejected. In the meantime, Independence was granted to Ceylon in 1948 and a single vote parliamentary system was adopted based on territorial representation in place of communal representation. After receiving a majority of votes in the elections of 1947, a ruling government was formed by the United National Party (UNP) led by D.S. Senanayake, who became the first Prime Minister of independent Ceylon (Silva, 1974, pp1-2).

After Sinhalese dominance was established in the Legislative Assembly, the Tamils were subject to feelings of extreme insecurity. They suffered from various emotions such as a sense of betrayal, fear, resentment, rage, etc. According to security base theories, such emotional feelings provided a 'switch' - the motivation for action (Lake & Rothschild, 1996; Posen, 1993). This prompted the Tamil leaders to gradually shift to a different path to secure their future interests. Further, the resultant feelings of the Tamil elites caused certain rebellious ideas to take root in their minds to create the dangerous conflict dynamics that was witnessed later in the Ceylon political arena.

Keywords: Elites; Legislative Assembly; Sinhalese; Tamil

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