

Intra-Ethnic Electoral Violence in Divided Societies: The Case of Sri Lanka

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-9/11 world, which is marked by a heightened focus on the benefits of democratization, elections have taken on new significance. While it is true that they can be markers of the onset of democracy, elections can also, unfortunately, be the sites of substantial bloodshed. This may be particularly true in deeply divided societies, where political power often means disproportionate economic and political privileges for certain communities. A striking recent example is Kenya, which was rocked by violence in the aftermath of the December 2007 polls. When Raila Odinga, the leader of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), accused incumbent President Mwai Kibaki's government of electoral fraud, ethnic violence involving at least five Kenyan communities on both sides of the political divide broke out. The rioting, looting, rape and murder spread throughout the country, leaving more than 1,000 dead and another approximately 300,000 internally displaced (Barkan 2008, 4). Kenya is not alone. In 2009, both the Iranian and Indian elections were also marked by significant amounts of bloodshed.

While analysts have studied the inter-ethnic dimensions of the violence in such cases at length, they have focused less attention on the possible intra-ethnic component involved. This paper seeks to investigate the ways in which inter-ethnic conflict impacts intra-ethnic relations. Specifically, through a case study of Sri Lanka, I will study how electoral campaigns provoke intra-ethnic conflict and the variation in this type of violence over time. My preliminary hypothesis is that in conflict-prone and/or war-torn, ethnically divided societies, political parties representing the ethnic majority community, where one exists, engage in a policy of "pricing peace" to mobilize voters' fears. Given a context in which the population wants peace but various constituencies are willing to "pay" different "prices" for it, political parties find themselves forced to make the resolution of the

conflict a primary electoral issue. When one party (the “negotiator” party) campaigns on promises of peace, thereby winning support from the minority as well as moderates from the majority community, the other party (the “accuser” party) finds itself unable to offer a better plan. Instead, the “accuser” party resorts to inflammatory rhetoric, portraying the negotiators as willing to concede too much in order to end the inter-ethnic conflict. This portrayal incites fear in accuser-party supporters, who worry about the threat that an empowered minority group will deprive them politically, economically or culturally in the future. This fear then drives violence within the ethnic majority group, as accuser-party and negotiator-party supporters turn on each other to prevent the other’s electoral victory. The amount of violence varies according to the degree to which the accuser/negotiator dynamic dominates the campaign.

In order to critically examine this issue, this study focuses on the case of Sri Lanka, a country that was wracked by a civil war between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities for more than a quarter of a century (1983 – 2009). Elections in Sri Lanka are notoriously bloody. In the 2000 general election, for instance, the Colombo-based Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) reported that the 39 total days of campaigning were marked by 2,044 incidents of violence, including 66 murders and 41 attempted murders (CMEV 2000, 1). This political context makes Sri Lanka an optimal case for investigation.

Given the long history of the Sri Lankan civil war, it is not surprising that casual observers of Sri Lankan politics assume that the staggering amount of electoral violence is inter-ethnic in nature. Surprisingly, however, my preliminary investigation reveals that a large amount of the violence occurs in districts that are between 70 and 100 percent Sinhalese, where Tamils constitute an average of just 3 percent of the population. Thus, it seems unlikely that using violence to prevent minorities from voting could affect electoral outcomes in any significant way (See Figure 1). Instead, the concentration of violence in Sinhalese-dominant districts implies that intra-ethnic violence is an

important part of the picture. In Tamil-dominated districts, there is also intra-ethnic violence, although in these districts it is the result of Tamil extremists attempting to prevent Tamil moderates from participating in elections. This project focuses on examining the intra-ethnic violence within the Sinhalese community, and in order to conduct a test of my hypothesis, I will investigate the use of the accuser/negotiator dynamic as well as the electoral violence that occurred at the district level in national elections.

In order to study the degree to which the accuser/negotiator dynamic described above applies in Sri Lanka, I intend to use content analyses of newspaper reports of electoral campaigns that took place during the inter-ethnic civil war in order to identify to what degree, if at all, politicians exaggerated Tamil stereotypes or presented elite-level peace negotiations in a provocative way, thereby inciting fears about the Tamil minority within the Sinhalese community. The project then shifts its focus to the election-related violence itself. Using data from the CMEV and the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), I hope to show that there is a significant amount of violence in Sinhalese-majority districts, which implies that there is indeed considerable intra-ethnic violence during Sri Lankan elections.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Elections as Political Institutions

Institutions provide society with a critical sense of order, engendering patterned regularity in political life through a set of rules. These rules offer order in three ways. First, they constitute social, economic and political situations in which human agents interact to realize mutual gains. Second, they invest human agents with situation-specific identities in terms of roles and expectations, thereby defining their social persona. Third, they prescribe, proscribe and permit people's choices of goals, strategies and behavior (Mozaffar 1995, 43). In sum, institutional rules describe people's roles and positions in society, and they offer bounds for appropriate behavior. Institutions are also

important, because they configure organizational mechanisms like political parties and elections, which aggregate and articulate political interests (Mozaffar 1995, 53).

One central political institution is the election, which acts as a channel of communication between citizens and political elites. In representative democracies, elections lend legitimacy to and ensure a certain degree of responsiveness from the government, they facilitate the installation of officials, and they offer choices to citizens with regard to who is best suited to rule (Katz 1997, 102-105). Indeed, many analysts define democracy largely around elections (Barro 1999 and Huntington 1991). In fact, Staffan Lindberg goes as far as to say that despite the fact that elections can co-exist with highly undemocratic practices, they are “a causal variable in democratization,” facilitating the institutionalization of civil liberties (Lindberg 2006, 2).

Even those scholars who adopt a more complex definition of democracy note the importance of elections. Charles Tilly refers to the centrality of elections in his typology of the definitions of democracy. “Most procedural observers center their attention on elections, asking whether genuinely competitive elections engaging large numbers of citizens regularly produce changes in governmental personnel and policy” (Tilly 2007, 8). Even process-oriented definitions, such as that of Robert Dahl, despite their attention to a minimum set of processes that are continually in motion, include procedures of equal voting (Dahl 1998, 37-38).

Electoral Engineering: The Mitigation and Provocation of Violence

Political institutions play especially critical roles in divided societies, for stable inter-ethnic competition is based upon well-established and accepted rules. Since electoral institutions can be crafted to respond to the specific needs of various societies, many researchers and policy-makers argue that, given the proper set of conditions, polls can start to heal societal divisions (Lijphart 1977; Reilly 2002; Sisk and Reynolds 1998). Indeed, Arend Lijphart’s consociational model, which is based on proportional representation and power-sharing, has long been the dominant model of

democracy for divided societies. In recent years, however, a number of scholars have challenged the consociational approach. Instead of replicating existing ethnic divisions in the legislature, “centripetal” models, which rely on preferential voting systems, encourage politicians to make broadly based centrist appeals beyond their core supporters by making electoral success dependent on the transfer of preference votes from other ethnic groups (Horowitz 1985, 1991; Reilly 1997, 2001).

Of course, elections can also be violent occurrences, threatening the legitimacy of political representatives as well as the link between citizens and the state (Rapoport and Weinberg 2001).

An electoral process is an alternative to violence as it is a means of achieving governance. It is when an electoral process is perceived as unfair, unresponsive, or corrupt, that its political legitimacy is compromised and stakeholders are motivated to go outside the established norms to achieve their objectives. Electoral conflict and violence become tactics in political competition. (Fischer 2002, 2).

Indeed, an investigation of the link between elections and violence reveals that several factors have a bearing on this relationship, including the nature of the actors involved, the type of electoral institution in use and the stakes of victory/defeat. Specifically, violence may be a byproduct of manipulative political elites who can take advantage of the public’s lack of awareness of elite-level negotiations. For instance, when leaders have a tenuous hold on power and there is fear among the citizenry, it may be especially easy for elites to convince voters that they are in need of protection. This portrayal can then incite fear in the populace, who feel that they must be willing to support violence in exchange for protection of their lives, livelihoods and families. Using the cases of Serbia and Rwanda, Rui J.P. de Figueiredo, Jr. and Barry Weingast explain that citizens, who have no way of knowing what the other side’s true intentions towards them are, follow leaders because it is their best chance of protection against a group that, for all they know, intends to harm them (de Figueiredo, Jr. and Weingast 1999, 265).

Elections can also turn bloody because of the particular electoral system in use. For instance, proportional representation systems, which use multi-member constituencies, tend to create incentives for intra-party fighting and factionalization. This is because candidates from one party are competing against candidates from the opposing party as well as candidates from their own party (Hicken 1). Violence can ensue when elites feel especially threatened, as they might when there is a demand for more popular participation in government. In this case, elites may incite fear and mistrust within the population, which can lead to violence but will allow elites to maintain their grip on power (Klopp 2001; Snyder 2000; Wilkinson 2004). Finally, electoral competitors may resort to violence when one party is permanently excluded from access to political power and when the party in power has little incentive to compromise or include the opposition in any significant way. Such a perpetually adversarial political relationship between the ethnic group and the ruling group is more likely to turn violent (Birbir 2007, 11).

Clearly, extant societal divisions give political elites opportunities to win electoral support by manipulating fear and mistrust within the population. As the scholars above have made clear, inter-ethnic hostility and violence can largely be attributed to elite action. What is less clear, however, is the effect of such tactics on intra-ethnic relations. To investigate this question, I examine recent Sri Lankan history.

The Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka is a relatively small country, spanning approximately 25,000 square miles and comprised of roughly 20 million people (DeVotta 2004, 21). It is an ethnically and religiously plural society (See Table 1).

Table 1: Sri Lanka's Ethnic and Religious Population

Sri Lankan Religions*		Sri Lankan Ethnicities**	
Buddhist	65%	Sinhalese	82%
Hindu	6.60%	Tamil	9.40%
Muslim	7.20%	Muslim	7.90%
Christian	5.90%	Burgher	0.20%
		Malay	0.30%
		Veddhas	0.20%
		TOTAL	100%

**Source: 2001 Census Report*; Since these figures are calculated based on the 2001 census, which did not cover areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), it is likely that the percentages of Hindus, Muslims and Christians are underestimated.

***Source: Neil DeVotta. 2004. Blowback. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press*

Sri Lankan scholars contend that the Sinhalese, the vast majority of whom are Buddhist, arrived in Sri Lanka from India approximately 2,500 years ago. Over time, the group was exposed to and influenced by Portuguese and English culture and to a lesser extent by Dutch, Burmese and Thai traditions (de Silva 1998, 8). Many scholars claim that the Sri Lankan Tamil community, the majority of which is Hindu, originally from southern India more recently, about 1,500 years ago. The exact timeline, however, is contested. Indian Tamils, on the other hand, came from India in the 19th and early 20th centuries, brought by British colonizers to work on Sri Lanka's tea plantations (de Silva 1998, 9). While the two Tamil groups share a language, there is little convergence of political attitudes among them. Sri Lanka's Muslim population, while Tamil speaking, considers itself to be a distinct ethnic group. Over the course of the war, it has been strongly opposed to the establishment of a separate Tamil state. In fact, there have been several notable incidents of violence between the Muslims and the Tamils, especially in the eastern province, where a large proportion of the Muslim community lives (de Silva 1998, 9-11). Sri Lanka is also home to a small Burgher community, whose members are descendants of Dutch and Portuguese settlers and to a small Malay population who arrived in Sri Lanka with the Dutch colonizers. Finally, there are the Veddhas, an indigenous

community that has been excessively marginalized (DeVotta 2004, 24). The island is relatively segregated. While the Sinhalese are concentrated in the southern and western parts of the country, the Tamils tend to live in the northern and eastern areas.

Sri Lanka's political history has been dominated by the civil war between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil groups. As a result of Sinhalese nationalist fervor and discriminatory policies in the early days of independence, relations with the Tamils became increasingly hostile. After the nascent Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) murdered a group of soldiers in 1983, pogroms against Tamils in Colombo marked the beginning of the war. The July 1983 rioters decimated Tamil-owned businesses, raped and slaughtered Tamil civilians and provoked a massive Tamil migration to the northeastern areas of the island and abroad. Between 1983 and 2009, when the Sri Lankan armed forces militarily defeated the rebels, the war killed upwards of 80,000 people and saw the LTTE evolve into one of the world's most fearsome terrorist organizations.

Surprisingly, in spite of the ongoing war, Sri Lanka has held regular elections since independence. Unfortunately, however, those elections have been notoriously bloody affairs (Höglund and Piyarathne 2009; de Silva 1998; Tambiah 1996; Wilson 2001). Indeed, in the week prior to the January 26, 2010 poll, the Sri Lankan *Sunday Times* newspaper reported that electoral violence was "rising to proportions never seen before" (Sunday Times 2010). What explains this historical pattern?

A partial answer lies in Sri Lanka's colonial history, which was dominated by approximately 150 years of British rule. Through the use of their infamous "divide and rule" policy, British colonizers created enduring societal divisions between the majority Sinhalese community and the minority Tamil group, the latter of which was favored with access to coveted government jobs and higher education (Sahadevan and DeVotta 2006, 36). Soon after independence, the rising Sinhalese nationalist movement claimed that unfairly advantaged Tamils were threatening the future of the

Sinhalese community. Gaining widespread popularity, the nationalists won the 1956 election on a platform of “Sinhala Only, and in twenty-four hours,” setting the stage for inter-ethnic conflict (Sahadevan and DeVotta 2006, 14). Closely tied to the nationalist movement is Sinhalese Buddhist mythology, which politicians have routinely manipulated for their own political gain. In public speeches, political and religious leaders emphasize Sinhalese superiority and their sacred, historic right to rule, portraying Tamils as foreign, evil and natural subjects for violence (Little 1994; Kapferer 1988). Violence can also be attributed to Sri Lankan politicians’ power grabs over the years. Stanley Tambiah cites the rise of the “authoritarian state” and the weakened opposition as contributors to increasing “neofascist” tendencies within government (Tambiah 1986).

While all of these theories contribute to an understanding of the inter-ethnic hostility on the island, they do not address intra-ethnic relations. In order to investigate within-group dynamics, it is necessary to turn to other factors, including caste and patronage networks. Caste has long played a role in Sri Lankan politics, and scholars have noted both the dominance of members of the Goigama caste in politics as well as inter-caste rivalry for access to positions of political power (Jiggins 1979 and Roberts 1982). More recently, however, the importance of patronage networks has also been noted (Jayanthi 1992). In fact, Kristine Höglund and Anton Piyarathne note that incumbents have the resources to reward supporters who use violence to prevent the opposition from voting with welfare services, business contracts and jobs. Since institutions like the election commissioner, judiciary and police are more likely to side with the incumbents, they can also get away with violence (Höglund and Piyarathne 2009). The problem, however, is that neither caste nor patronage networks explain the role of the inter-ethnic conflict. While caste and patronage may explain a part of the picture, it is hard to believe that the civil war, which ravaged the country for a quarter of a century, did not have some impact on intra-group relations.

In contrast to the large majority of work on ethnic conflict, Kenneth Bush's study of Sri Lankan politics begins by acknowledging the prevalence of intra-ethnic violence in Sri Lanka (Bush 2003, 12). Bush posits that inter- and intra-group violence impact and shape each other. Applying inter-group and intra-group models of interaction to "critical junctures" in Sri Lankan history, he seeks to explain when and why inter-group polarization, conflict escalation and intransigence are caused by intra-group rather than inter-group relationships (Bush 2003, 17). Unfortunately, however, his study focuses on a few specific periods of Sri Lankan history, neglecting vast amounts of time in between what he identifies as "critical junctures." His study also does not systematically consider *electoral* violence.

III. ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

As Bush explains, it is important to consider the possibility that inter-ethnic conflict might affect intra-ethnic relations. In this paper, I will argue that during the period of the civil war, Sinhalese politicians strategically capitalized on inter-ethnic tensions, manipulating latent fears within the Sinhalese community to win votes. Specifically, Sinhalese political parties mobilized voters' fears by engaging in a "pricing peace" strategy, characterized by parties competing to prove the superiority of their respective plans to resolve the conflict. In Sri Lanka, there are only two parties with a realistic chance of winning elections: the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP), both of which largely represent the Sinhalese community. During the course of the war, violence ensued when one party (the "accuser" party) portrayed the other party (the "negotiator" party) as willing to concede too much in order to diplomatically end the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. This portrayal provoked fear in party supporters, who worried about the threat that the minority group posed to their well-being. This fear then drove violence between Sinhalese supporters of rival parties, and the amount of violence was greater when the accuser/negotiator dynamic dominated the campaign. In order to test the preliminary hypothesis, I

intend to investigate the violence that occurred at the district level during all national elections that took place during the civil war, which lasted from 1983 to 2009.

As noted above, various theories explain why elites might resort to “pricing peace,” including political candidates’ own feelings of insecurity as well as their personal stake in particular policies. In the case of Sri Lanka, I suggest that elites choose to utilize “pricing peace” for two reasons: it is a relatively easy way for parties to differentiate themselves from each other and it is an effective tool for threatened elites to use to win “ethnic votes” from within their own group. Indeed, the stakes of electoral victory in Sri Lanka are incredibly high, primarily because of the significant political credit to be won from making peace with the LTTE.

First, given the overriding importance of the war, the resolution of which was the centerpiece of many electoral campaigns, it is not surprising that the Sinhalese parties created unique identities based on their positions regarding the conflict. Specifically, one party would position itself in the middle of the spectrum of voters, all of whom wanted peace but varied with regard to how much they were willing to sacrifice for it. This party’s offer of a negotiated settlement would satisfy a bare majority of the Sinhalese and also satisfy the Tamils. This position was critical, because offering more would involve a loss of some Sinhalese and offering less would not be amenable to the Tamils. Unable to “beat” this offer, the other party resorted to inflammatory rhetoric, rousing fear about the negotiators’ true intentions. Thus, while the SLFP-led People’s Alliance (PA) supported peace talks with the LTTE in 1994 and the UNP said such talks amounted to a betrayal of the Sinhalese community, in 2001 each party argued the exact opposite position. In the latter election, the UNP advocated talks and the PA accused it of setting up a secret deal to empower the LTTE (Schaffer 1995, 422 and DeVotta 2002, 95).

A second reason Sinhalese elites choose manipulation of popular fears as a campaign strategy is their own feeling of threat. As de Figueiredo, Jr. and Weingast (1999), Snyder (2000), and

Wilkinson (2004) all suggest, elites who are under threat of losing power often resort to such tactics. Thus, even though PA candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga defined her entire 1994 campaign by advocating for peace with the LTTE, when rival UNP Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was making headway during the 2003 peace talks, she used her power as president to take over key ministries, dissolve parliament and call for new elections while the prime minister was abroad. Her public justification for disrupting the talks revolved around vague “national security” issues, making it apparent that her primary motivation was the prevention of the UNP gaining credit for achieving peace (Waldman 2004).

Indeed, parties wanted to be able to take credit for resolving the war, because that is one way in which they have a relatively high chance of maintaining long-term power. Neither of the two dominant Sinhalese parties wanted its rival to win that credit. As a result, each was willing to go to extreme ends to prevent such a scenario. In fact, Kumaratunga’s move to disrupt the UNP-led peace talks in 2003, referenced above, was little more than an attempt to prevent the UNP from winning more political credit.

Kumaratunga loathes the prime minister and is especially angry that she, despite bringing in the Norwegians to facilitate the peace process, has been sidelined since the [Memorandum of Understanding] was signed. As the *Financial Times* noted in an editorial, ‘It is hard to escape the conclusion that Mrs. Kumaratunga could not bear to see her bitter rival Ranil Wickremesinghe...succeeding where she had failed.’ (DeVotta 2004, 184).

If it is true that “accuser” Sinhalese parties manipulate fears about an empowered Tamil minority within the Sinhalese community by accusing “negotiators” of planning to concede too much to minorities, it would not be surprising to find that accuser party-supporters turn on negotiator party-supporters members (and vice-versa) at the polls. The evidence for this is discussed in the following section.

IV. DATA AND ANALYSIS

Data and Methodology

Two types of evidence are necessary to demonstrate that the accuser/negotiator dynamic is at work and that it incites intra-ethnic electoral violence. First, it is necessary to examine whether or not Sinhalese politicians are indeed using manipulative, ethnicized rhetoric in campaign activities.

There were four presidential (1988, 1994, 1999 and 2005) and five parliamentary (1989, 1994, 2000, 2001, and 2004) elections during the civil war. Since the 1988 presidential and 1989 parliamentary polls were dominated much more by JVP violence than civil war-related violence, however, this paper focuses on the polls that took place in 1994 and thereafter. Content analysis is useful in this context, for it brings to light the ways in which politicians' election campaigns can influence the amount and type of violence that ensues. Specifically, in a future study I plan to use ATLAS.ti, a content analysis software program, to analyze media coverage of electoral campaigns. By using keywords to characterize the ways in which Sinhalese politicians represent the Tamil community in campaign speeches and political party platforms, I will be able to differentiate between elections that were marked by the accuser/negotiator dynamic and those that were not. In combination with data on the amount of violence per campaign, I will be able to identify any correlation that might exist between the use of the accuser/negotiator dynamic and the amount of violence. Since access to the archives of Sri Lankan newspapers is necessary for this part of the study, content analysis is not possible at this time. Instead, I draw on secondary sources, which offer some preliminary evidence of the accuser/negotiator dynamic at work. In the following analysis, I use examples from the 1994, 2000, 2001 and 2004 elections to demonstrate the history of the use of the accuser/negotiator dynamic.

In the 1994 presidential election, the main contenders were PA coalition leader Chandrika Kumaratunga and UNP candidate Gamini Dissanayake. Kumaratunga based her campaign largely around plans to resolve the ethnic conflict with the island's Tamil community. Thus, she promised to move forward with "vigorous implementation of genuine and adequate devolution of power" to

administrative units in the north and east. “To bring home the point that Chandrika was the candidate of peace and ethnic harmony, the Kumaratunga campaign distributed posters depicting her with a white dove” (Schaffer 1995, 416; 421). In response, the UNP campaign brought out the communal card.

UNP leaders alleged that by taking an accommodating approach to the LTTE, Kumaratunga was selling out to the Sinhalese majority. A vote for her, they said, was a vote for the Tigers. To dramatize that point, UNP supporters surreptitiously painted a forehead dot – a Hindu symbol – on the prime minister’s poster picture in some Colombo neighborhoods. (Schaffer 1995, 422-423)

It seems, then, that the UNP, threatened by Kumaratunga’s successful appeal for peace, attempted to portray her as pandering to Tamils in order to frighten voters away from supporting her.

Unsurprisingly, this election was one of the most violent to date. In fact, in response to the violence that marred the campaign, the government implemented an island-wide nighttime curfew beginning on Election Day (Schaffer 1995, 417-418).

Six years later, in the 2000 parliamentary polls, the parties swapped positions. Now, despite her own efforts to create peace in the years preceding the election, Kumaratunga portrayed her rivals as traitors for seeking to make peace with the LTTE. The PA used an alleged meeting between UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and the LTTE to accuse the latter of funding the former’s campaign. Wickremesinghe’s promise to include the LTTE in seeking a solution to the war led the PA to claim that his government had no intention of militarily defeating the rebels, a scenario that was highly unpopular within much of the Sinhalese community (Sahadevan and DeVotta 2006, 84). This pattern of “pricing peace” continued into the 2001 election, held just over a year later. In the run-up to this poll, Kumaratunga’s PA alleged that the UNP had agreed to a secret deal with the LTTE to dismember the country. In statements that were strikingly similar to those that had been levied against her in previous polls, PA leader Kumaratunga said that a vote for the UNP was a vote for making LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran the Sri Lankan president (De Votta 2002, 95). As

discussed in Section III above, this same dynamic was at work in late 2003, ahead of the 2004 election. This preliminary evidence supports the hypothesis that the 1994, 2000, 2001 and 2004 campaigns were the sites of the accuser/negotiator dynamic at work. In all three of these elections, the two main Sinhalese parties took turns accusing each other of “selling out” to the Tamils, thereby inciting fears of Tamil domination within the Sinhalese community.

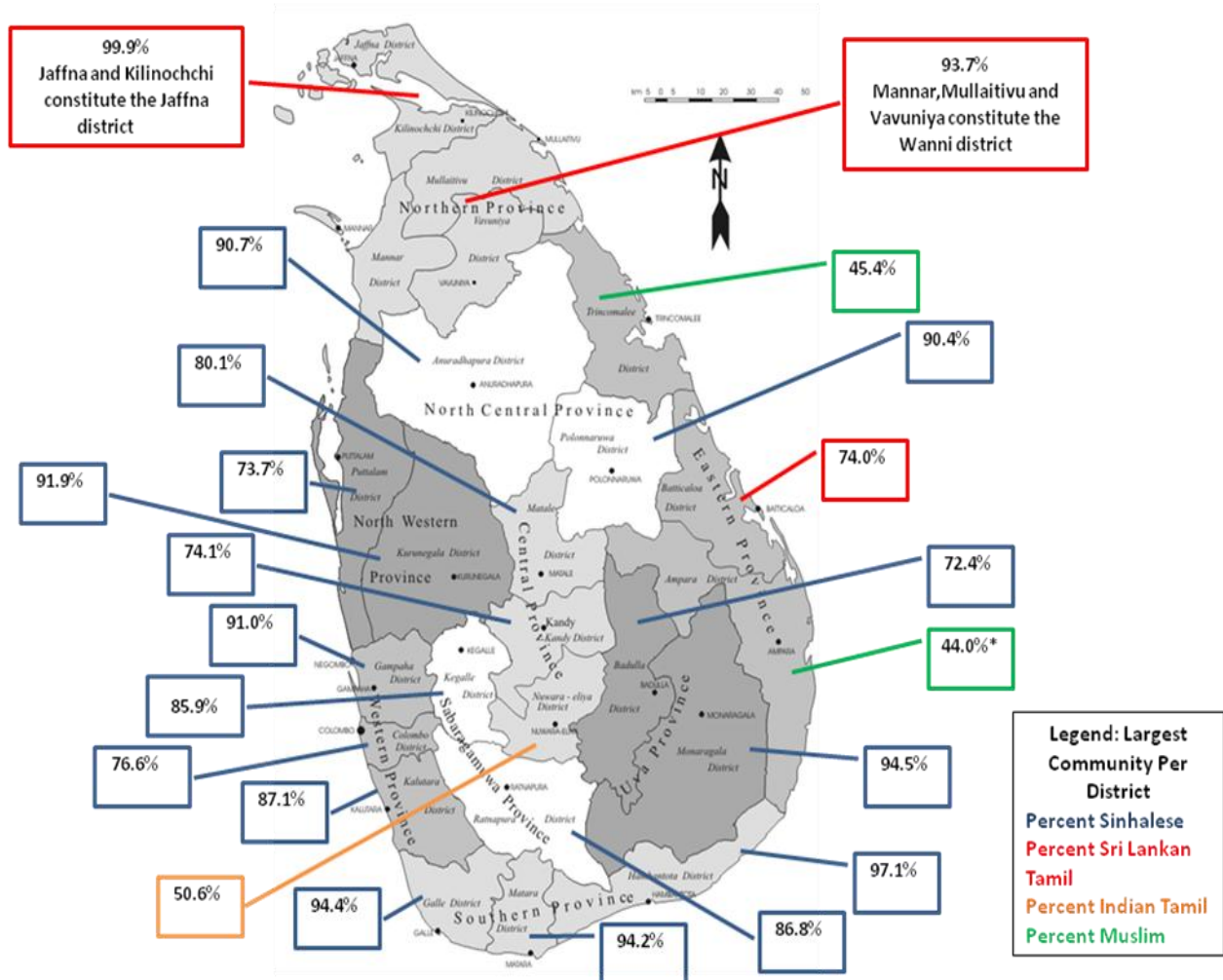
The second type of evidence necessary for this study is a count of the incidents of violence per district during the elections in question. By examining how much violence there is per election and investigating whether or not it occurs in relatively homogenous districts, it is possible to infer whether or not the violence is inter- or intra-ethnic in nature. This paper makes use of the limited amount of available digital data, primarily from the CMEV and the Sri Lankan Department of the Census, to conduct a preliminary investigation of the violence that marked the 2000, 2001 and 2004 elections. Specifically, it illustrates that districts in which the Sinhalese are in the majority are, in most cases, more violent than are more heterogeneous and more Tamil-dominant districts.

Demographics of Sri Lankan Electoral Districts

Sri Lankan demography changed dramatically after the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. The violence sparked mass migration within the country as Tamils fled to the north and east, areas they considered to be their traditional homeland. It caused many others to leave the country all together, creating an international Tamil diaspora. As a result, ethnic groups are largely segregated, and Sri Lanka's 22 electoral districts are mostly dominated by the Sinhalese population. In fact, as is evident in Figure 1, the Sinhalese community constitutes at least 90 percent of the population in 8 districts. In another 8 districts, members of the Sinhalese ethnic group make up anywhere from 70 to 89 percent of the population. It is only in historically Tamil districts in the north and the east that the Sinhalese are a minority, ranging anywhere from 0 to approximately 40 percent of the population. Sri Lankan Tamils are largely concentrated in the northern and eastern provinces, areas the LTTE claimed for a

future Tamil state, or *eelam*. They constitute an absolute majority in three districts: Batticaloa in the east and Jaffna and Wanni in the north. In the other electoral districts in the southern, western and central parts of the country, Sri Lankan Tamils are a small part of the population, constituting anywhere from 0 to 11 percent of the total population.

Figure 1: Percent of Largest Ethnic Group in Sri Lanka’s Administrative and Electoral Districts



Source: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka
 Available at: http://www.ices.lk/sl_database/maps/towns.shtml;
 Sri Lanka Department of the Census and Statistics. Available at
<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/PDF/Population/p9p8%20Ethnicity.pdf>;
 *Ampana is also known as Digamadulla, which is the name used to refer to the district in this paper.

Table 2 provides a more detailed account of the population per district. Notably, it is apparent that although the LTTE claimed the north and the east as their homeland, part of that territory is home to the Sri Lankan Muslim population. In the eastern districts of Digamadulla, Trincomalee and Batticaloa, especially, Muslims are a sizeable part of the district population.

Table 2: Ethnic Composition of Districts

District	Percent Sinhalese	Sri Lankan Tamil	Indian Tamil	Muslims	Other
Hambantota	97.1	0.4	0.1	1.1	1.4
Moneragala	94.5	1.4	1.9	2.0	0.1
Galle	94.4	1.1	0.9	3.5	0.0
Matara	94.2	0.7	2.2	2.9	0.0
Kurunegala	91.9	1.2	0.2	6.5	0.2
Gampaha	91.0	3.2	0.4	3.8	1.7
Anuradhapura	90.7	0.7	0.1	8.3	0.2
Polonnaruwa	90.4	2.0	0.1	7.5	0.0
Kalutara	87.1	1.2	2.7	8.7	0.3
Ratnapura	86.8	2.8	8.1	2.0	0.1
Kegalle	85.9	1.9	5.6	6.4	0.1
Matale	80.1	5.5	5.3	8.7	0.3
Colombo	76.6	11.0	1.1	9.0	2.3
Kandy	74.1	4.1	8.1	13.1	0.6
Puttalam	73.7	6.8	0.3	18.8	0.5
Badulla	72.4	3.8	18.4	5.0	0.4
Nuwara Eliya	40.2	6.5	50.6	2.4	0.4
Digamadulla*	37.5	18.3	0.0	44.0	0.2
Trincomalee*	25.4	28.6	0.1	45.4	0.5
Batticaloa*	0.5	74.0	0.0	25.0	0.5
Jaffna*	0.0	99.9	0.0	0.1	0.0
Wanni**	4.8	93.7	0.3	1.2	0.0

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2001.

*Figures for these districts are from 2007

**Since Wanni was at the heart of the LTTE-controlled areas, there are no recent, official statistics available. The figures for Wanni are based on a 2001 estimate of the average ethnic composition of the districts of Jaffna and Wanni together. It can be reasonably assumed that there are more Sri Lankan Tamils and less Sinhalese than what is estimated here.

Violence at the District Level: Location

The sections above highlight some examples of the way Sinhalese politicians use their electoral campaigns to manipulate popular fears of the Tamil community and rebels. This section details the nature of the violence that follows these campaigns.

While systematic statistical analysis is necessary to show any correlation that may exist between the use of the accuser/negotiator dynamic and violence, a preliminary investigation of where the violence is occurring may allow for some preliminary inferences regarding whether it is intra- or inter-ethnic in nature. The following data show that the 2000, 2001 and 2004 polls were highly violent. Specifically, the concentration of electoral violence in Sinhalese-majority districts, which occurred on the heels of campaigns marked by the accuser/negotiator dynamic, suggests an initial correlation between the use of the accuser/negotiator dynamic and intra-ethnic electoral violence in Sri Lanka.

First, as is clear in Figure 2¹, other than within the sole district that comprises the decile of “30 percent Sinhalese,” electoral violence is greatest in highly Sinhalese districts; it generally decreases as the homogeneity of the electoral districts decreases. In fact, Table 3 shows that in 2000, 2001 and 2004, there were an average of 110 total incidents of violence in districts that are home to the least number of Sinhalese (in the last decile), and there were an average of 368 incidents of violence in districts with the most Sinhalese constituents (in the first decile), making the average violence in the last decile only 30 percent of that in the first decile.

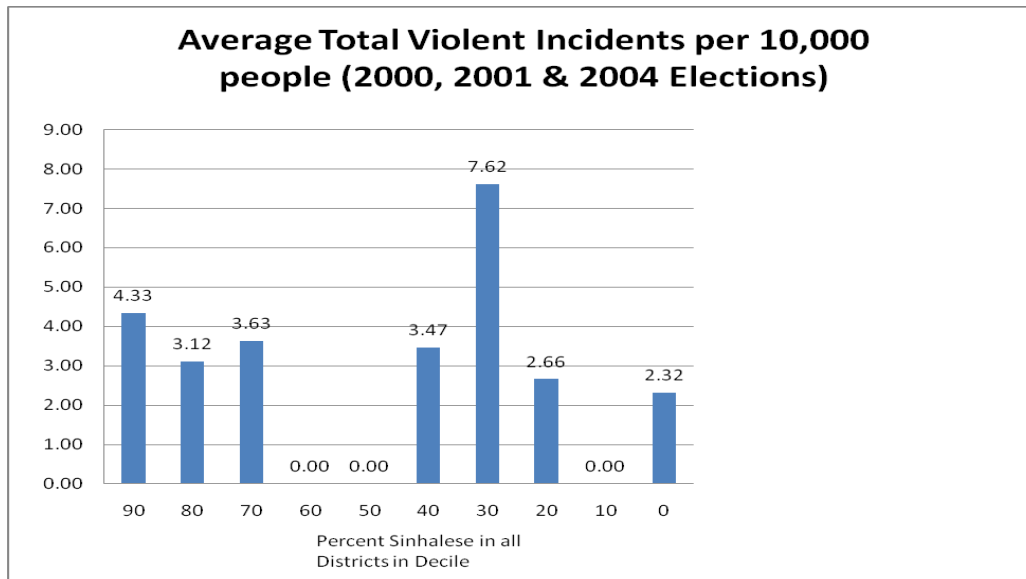
Second, Table 3 shows that of the ten most violent areas in all three elections under review, nine districts are those in which the populations is more than 70 percent Sinhalese. If there is so

¹ Figure 2 was created in the following way: First, I grouped all districts into deciles by the percentage of Sinhalese in the district. Thus, the decile of “10% Sinhalese” is made up of Jaffna, Wanni and Batticaloa, where the Sinhalese constitute between 0 and 10 percent of the population. I then averaged the number of violent incidents for the 2000, 2001 and 2004 elections for all districts within each decile. In order to facilitate comparison of violence across districts, I then standardized the averages to reflect the amount of violence per 10,000 people.

much violence occurring in areas where most of the population is Sinhalese, it follows that at least some of that violence is intra-ethnic, especially when considering the identity of the perpetrators of much of the violence, an issue which is taken up below.

Third, Trincomalee (which makes up the decile of “20 percent Sinhala” in Figure 2) is the only district that is home to nearly equal numbers of Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils, making it what would seem like an ideal site for high levels of inter-ethnic violence. Yet, Trincomalee is a district that experiences relatively little violence. In all three years under review, there were an average of 2.7 violent incidents/10,000 people in Trincomalee, compared to an average of 4.3 violent incidents/10,000 people in districts that are between 90 and 100 percent Sinhalese. **Figure 2:**

Incidents of Electoral Violence per 10,000 People: 2000, 2001 and 2004



Source: Sri Lanka Department of the Census and Statistics. Available at <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/PDF/Population/p9p8%20Ethnicity.pdf>; CMEV Reports on the 2000, 2001 and 2004 Elections

While it is necessary to conduct fieldwork to test the idea, it is possible that Trincomalee is relatively violence-free because of what Ashutosh Varshney (2002) calls “civic life,” the existence of intercommunal associations, such as business organizations, trade unions, political parties, and

professional societies. Perhaps civic associations in this district bind the interests of Sinhalese and Tamil together, creating incentives for cooperation. Given the importance of tourism to the district,² it would not be surprising to find that Sinhalese and Tamil business owners have a joint interest in preventing violence that would affect their industry. In fact, Nilaveli Beach in Trincomalee is popularly known as “one of Sri Lanka’s most perfect beaches.” The low rates of violence in the district of Trincomalee provide preliminary evidence that inter-ethnic violence is not always the norm, even when an area is ethnically mixed.

Table 3: Incidents of Violence per District in 2000, 2001 and 2004

District	Percent Sinhalese	Sri Lankan Tamil	Indian Tamil	Muslims	Other	Violent Incidents 2000	Violent Incidents 2001	Violent Incidents 2004	Total per district
Hambantota	97.1	0.4	0.1	1.1	1.4	66	151	27	244
Moneragala	94.5	1.4	1.9	2.0	0.1	112	59	51	222
Galle	94.4	1.1	0.9	3.5	0.0	58	111	142	311
Matara	94.2	0.7	2.2	2.9	0.0	80	159	111	350
Kurunegala	91.9	1.2	0.2	6.5	0.2	173	256	103	532
Gampaha	91.0	3.2	0.4	3.8	1.7	196	247	138	581
Anuradhapura	90.7	0.7	0.1	8.3	0.2	119	267	107	493
Polonnaruwa	90.4	2.0	0.1	7.5	0.0	86	91	30	207
Kalutara	87.1	1.2	2.7	8.7	0.3	87	98	49	234
Ratnapura	86.8	2.8	8.1	2.0	0.1	46	88	110	244
Kegalle	85.9	1.9	5.6	6.4	0.1	105	147	51	303
Matale	80.1	5.5	5.3	8.7	0.3	62	40	75	177
Colombo	76.6	11.0	1.1	9.0	2.3	135	136	159	430
Kandy	74.1	4.1	8.1	13.1	0.6	144	142	84	370
Puttalam	73.7	6.8	0.3	18.8	0.5	128	247	82	457
Badulla	72.4	3.8	18.4	5.0	0.4	147	31	77	255
Nuwara Eliya	40.2	6.5	50.6	2.4	0.4	82	95	67	244
Digamadulla*	37.5	18.3	0.0	44.0	0.2	119	171	162	452
Trincomalee*	25.4	28.6	0.1	45.4	0.5	47	21	21	89
Batticaloa*	0.5	74.0	0.0	25.0	0.5	12	81	61	154
Jaffna*	0.0	99.9	0.0	0.1	0.0	15	55	23	93
Wanni**	4.8	93.7	0.3	1.2	0.0	25	42	17	84

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2001 and 2007; CMEV Reports on the 2000, 2001 and 2004 Elections.

*Figures for these districts are from 2007

**Since Wanni was at the heart of the LTTE-controlled areas, there are no recent, official statistics available. The figures for Wanni are based on a 2001 estimate of the average ethnic composition of the districts of Jaffna and Wanni together. It can be reasonably assumed that there are more Sri Lankan Tamils and less Sinhalese than what is estimated here.

-Shaded rows indicate top ten most violent districts in all three years

² According to the Annual Statistical Report of Sri Lankan Tourism, in 2005 and 2006, visitors to the Sri Lankan east coast, where Trincomalee is situated, constituted almost 30 percent of the country’s total tourism.

Fourth, while it is true that the sole district in the decile of “30 percent Sinhalese,” Digamadulla, experiences the most violence, it does not necessarily counter the hypothesis of this paper. The composition of Digamadulla is striking, because it has one of the highest concentrations of Muslims in the country (44.4 percent). Given the hostility which characterizes the relationship between the LTTE and the Muslims³, it would not be surprising if the accuser/negotiator dynamic was at work here. If the accuser Sinhalese party is stoking fears about the negotiator party conceding too much to Tamils, it is possible that Muslims are worried about the fate of their community under an empowered LTTE. While more research is necessary, it might be the case that they participate in violence against negotiator party-supporters, most of whom are Sinhalese, for the same reasons accuser party-supporters do; they do not want the LTTE to be able to determine their political future. Indeed, in the 2001 election, in which the PA accused the UNP of planning to empower LTTE supremo Prabhakaran, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) was the alleged perpetrator of 30 violent attacks in Digamadulla, putting it on par with the UNP, which was the alleged perpetrator of 24 attacks (CMEV 2001, 10). It could well be the case, then, that the Sinhalese parties’ use of the accuser/negotiator dynamic impacts the Muslim community, because it is also fearful of Tamil dominance. Thus, the accuser/negotiator dynamic can also motivate inter-ethnic violence.

Fifth, Sinhalese and Tamil parties concentrate their brutality in districts dominated by members of their own respective ethnic groups. While Sinhalese parties did commit violence in Tamil-dominant districts, it was relatively minimal. In all three polls, Sinhalese parties were responsible for 102 violent attacks in Batticaloa, Jaffna and Wannai, where Sri Lankan Tamils are in the majority. This was a mere 2.1 percent of the 4,754 total incidents of violence perpetrated by these parties in all three elections (CMEV 2000, 3; CMEV 2001, 4; CMEV 2004, 18), suggesting that the SLFP and the UNP were focusing primarily on largely Sinhalese districts. Given this

³ See K.M. de Silva. 1998. *Reaping the Whirlwind*. New Delhi, India: Penguin Books, pages 9-11.

situation, it does not seem that Sinhalese parties were making a serious effort to disrupt Tamil voting. Also, if Tamils were being targeted in heavily Sinhalese districts, it is likely that there would be at least some retaliation by Tamil parties in those districts. The data show, however, that Tamil violence is concentrated in Tamil districts. In fact, CMEV reports show that all but three of the 94 incidents of violence attributed to Tamil parties in all three elections occurred in Tamil areas of the northern and eastern provinces.

Overall, an investigation of the location of electoral violence reveals a pattern indicative of intra- rather than inter-ethnic strife.

Violence at the District Level: Identity of the Alleged Perpetrators

In addition to investigating where violence is occurring, it is useful to study who is committing violence. CMEV monitors reported in 2001 that the SLFP and UNP coalitions were responsible for 92.9 percent of all the offenses in which alleged perpetrators were identified. With regard to all three elections, the two dominant Sinhalese parties/coalitions were responsible for between 70.0 percent and 74.4 percent of all electoral violence.⁴ In contrast, Tamil parties were the alleged perpetrators of between 0.8 and 2.0 percent of all violence in the same years.⁵ If a large proportion of the violence was inter-ethnic, it would likely be the case that there would be more Tamil-perpetrated violence, even if only defensive in nature.

Overall, there is preliminary evidence that Sri Lankan politicians engage the accuser/negotiator dynamic in electoral campaigns, and data imply that there is a significant amount of intra-ethnic violence in the elections that follow these campaigns.

⁴ 2000: UNP responsible for 400 violent incidents; PA responsible for 1031 violent incidents. Together, this accounts for 70.0 percent of the 2044 total incidents of violence; 2001: UNP responsible for 751 violent incidents; PA responsible for 1284 violent incidents. Together, this accounts for 74.4 percent of the 2735 total incidents of violence; 2004: UNP coalition responsible for 820 violent incidents; SLFP coalition responsible for 468 violent incidents. Together, this accounts for 73.7 percent of the 1747 total incidents of violence.

⁵ These numbers were calculated from the CMEV 2000 report, page 3; CMEV 2001 report, page 4; CMEV 2004 report, page 18.

Implications

There is little documentation of intra-ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, and there is even less analysis of the concept. This is hardly surprising, given the 26-year long civil war that consumed the country. The prevalence of intra-ethnic violence among the majority community, however, is striking both in its intensity and regularity. This pattern of violence is important to consider for several reasons.

First, an investigation of the prevalence of intra-ethnic conflict is important, because many studies of inter-ethnic conflict rely on datasets that conflate different types of violence and different types of victims. Recognizing that some of what is assumed to be inter-ethnic is actually intra-ethnic could highlight an important but thus far neglected degree of variation in violence around the world.

Second, in their role as institutional mechanisms for the peaceful transfer of power, elections are critical in conflict-ridden societies. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that elections sometimes have the potential to incite violent conflict. It is often difficult for voters to trust the results of elections marred by violence. When citizens do not trust their government, it weakens the link between the citizen and the elected representative, a fundamental aspect of democratic government. Moreover, election-related violence can decrease voter turnout, which can lead to a government that is representative of only a small sector of the population. In this scenario, voters may begin to lose faith in the promise of democratic governance. A stable electoral system that has the trust of the people can be especially critical in post-conflict scenarios, where groups may still be relatively apprehensive about each other's intentions. An understanding of the ways in which electoral violence begins could allow for the development of institutional checks designed to minimize this violence.

Third, it is often the case that conflict resolution strategies concentrate on between-group reconciliation, neglecting within-group animosity. In post-conflict environments, it is important to

address all unresolved hostility, whether it is between or within communities. In order to prevent future violence, it is important to recognize that politicians can continue to provoke fears, even after inter-ethnic reconciliation efforts have begun. In this vein, it is important to direct significant attention towards intra-group reconciliation, even if deep inter-ethnic divisions are present within the society.

V. CONCLUSION

Analyses of the Sri Lankan political arena have largely focused on the island's inter-ethnic conflict. Understandably, the country's civil war and the rise of the LTTE have drawn attention far and wide. It is also important to recognize, however, that Sinhalese politicians have found ways of using the majority community's fears and insecurities against them, creating internal rifts that have often been colored by horrific electoral violence. Such incidents deserve attention, for the presence of high levels of intra-ethnic violence in an already ethnically divided society could signal both more internal division as well as weak electoral institutions.

My future analysis will investigate the reasons why politicians are able to foment intra-ethnic violence. In so doing, it will aim to answer questions regarding the range of choices politicians have when they decide what type of campaign strategy to use. Do politicians incite fear within their population because it is the easiest tactic or is there another reason that explains their actions? I also hope to further investigate districts like Digamadulla and Trincomalee, which experience extremely high and low levels of violence, respectively. Other than factors like apparent Muslim-Tamil strife and "civic life," is there something in the history of these districts that explains the patterns of violence there?

More research on such questions is important, especially because as of 2009 Sri Lanka is entering a new political era, marked by the momentous end of the civil war. A study of this new

political environment will likely be fertile ground for insights into both inter- and intra-ethnic relations in divided societies.

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