

## **External Intervention in Support of Opposition and Civil War Duration; An Analysis of Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict**

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### ***Abstract***

*External state interventions in support of rebels in civil conflict situations tend to have negative effect on the conflict by prolonging the expected duration of the conflict, particularly at the onset of the conflict. The ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka is a one fought primarily between the GoSL and the LTTE for about three decades in which India intervened in support of rebels (Tamil militants including LTTE) at the very early stage of the violent conflict. To analyze potential effects of Indian intervention upon the duration of the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, an analytical framework based on empirical argumentation was adopted. Accordingly, interventions in support of rebels in civil conflict situations tend to prolong the expected duration of the conflict, particularly at the onset of the conflict. The results show that there was a strong correlation between the Indian intervention and the prolongation of civil war in Sri Lankan context and thus the empirical understanding of the subject is substantiated by the findings.*

**KEY WORDS;** External state intervention, conflict duration, ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, Indian intervention, Government of Sri Lanka(GoSL)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Generally, intervention strategies regardless of their form are very likely to prolong the expected duration of the conflict when they are directed at supporting the opposition party of the conflict. However, the degree of effect that each of the strategies potentially has on the

conflict differs sharply. Strategies related to military form of intervention has more likelihood than other forms in prolonging the conflict.

Some of the past studies tend to infer that intervention strategies targeted at opposition at the onset of the civil war is very likely to prolong the expected duration of the conflict as rebels are likely to be militarily weaker than government during this stage. In other words, early interventions on behalf of the government should shorten the duration of war because they give the government, who is likely to already have a stronger military force than the rebels, a preponderance of power, making the rebel calculation of their probability of victory so low as to make continued fighting pointless. Early interventions on behalf of the rebels, in contrast, give the rebels of glimmer of hope, which should lengthen the duration of conflict. (Elbadawi and Sambanis 2002: Regan 2002) Thus, the hypothesis can be put forth that intervention strategy in support of opposition at the early stage of a conflict prolongs the expected duration of it(conflict).

As far as the literature on Sri Lankan case is concerned, they have a tendency to suggest that emergence and growth of Tamil militants as a powerful alternative force among Sri Lankan Tamils had an enormous impact on the prolongation of the conflict. Therefore, it is spontaneous to question what helped Tamil militants to become powerful force that in turn led to escalation of the conflict. The following section makes an attempt to answer the question by analyzing the causality of potential variables involved.

### **Beginning of Tamil Militancy and Early Government Response**

The second half of the decade 1970 underlines major changes in the history of Sri Lanka ethnic conflict. Many militant groups emerged among Tamil youths and students in Jaffna that posed threat and challenge to the traditional moderate politics of Tamils vis-a vis ethnic conflict. The first such challenge became visible in 1975 when then mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiyappa, was assassinated by a group of young militants (Sivarajah1995 p132: Gunaratne 1997: Tilekaratne 2006 p43).At the time of the assassination the total number of the militants could not have been more than fifty (Swamy1994). Until 1983, they were just few in number about 200-300 and limited in scope. They operated in five groups such as The LTTE, PLOTE, TELO, EPRLF and EROS around Jaffna area (Jeyeraj 2006: Richardson: Smith, 1999 p17).

Initially, their aims were to murder and terrorize collaborationist Tamil politicians affiliated with either of the two major national parties (UNP and SLFP) and of army and police personnel. Bank robberies provided income to survive, and weapons raided in the attacks on police stations were used to ambush army convoys and petrol (Krishna 1999: Sivarajah 1995). According to Narayan Swamy (1994), by April 1978, Tamil militants particularly LTTE had accumulated about 5 million rupees by robbing banks and cooperative stores and few weapons such as SMG, AK-47, shotguns and revolver. As for the rural poor, they were ambivalent and failed to lend much support to the militants.

As far as the Sri Lankan government's initial response is concerned, it took measures to crackdown the militancy thorough counter-insurgency measures first by deploying police force in the troubled area with enhanced power by enacting harsh laws such as the Proscription of LTTE and its successor the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provision) Act of 1978. Later in 1979, as attacks on the police station and assault on police personnel mounted steadily, Jaffna peninsula was brought under state of emergency and the government deployed military force under a tough commander with the mandate to "eliminate the menace of terrorism" in six months (Ranatunga, 1998 p209). As a result of the harsh counter-insurgency actions both by the police and military, militant network became greatly disrupted. As Swamy notes, Tamil militancy died down almost totally in 1980 (Swamy, 1994).

### **Tamil Nadu, Tamil Militants and Ethnic Conflict**

As far as the state of Tamil Nadu vis-a vis Sri Lankan ethnic conflict is concerned, though both Tamils in Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu are closely linked along ethnic religious and cultural lines, latter had been indifferent in the early days of the militancy in particular and the ethnic conflict in general except for some individual sympathizers who supported the Tamil cause both politically and materially that was limited in scale. (Krishna, 1999: Swamy, 1994) Providing sanctuary, hide out and training camps to Tamil militants those individuals helped militants pick up again their activities against Sri Lankan armed forces from early 1981. One major factor that contributed to the sustained Tamil militant campaign against the Sri Lankan state is the porous coastal border with Tamil Nadu that meant they (militants) could literally disappear across the Palk Straits after committing militant acts. (Gunaratne, 1997: Swamy, 1994: Abraham 2006: Tilekaratne, 2006). The incidence of such armed

robberies and political assassinations, followed by escape to Tamil Nadu, began to climb steeply after 1980 (Swamy, 1994 p63–91).

On the other side, Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka seemed to remain low profile among major political parties in Tamil Nadu. This became clear when the state government deported two Tamil militants who were apprehended by Indian Navy to Sri Lanka, although there were demonstration and hartals (general strike) condemning the violence against Tamils particularly Indian Tamils in the 1981 ethnic riot (Krishna, 1999). Despite, Tamil Nadu, especially after 1983, provided the ideal environment for the Tamil militants to establish the rear bases that were so essential to their military success (Abraham, 2006).

Therefore, in the initial or early period of Tamil militant and guerilla activities were confined to sporadic ambush and assault on police and army in Jaffna. In other words, they only used the conventional guerilla tactic of 'hit and run', and the scope of their operations was to Jaffna area. On the other side, the government was seeking a political solution to the conflict through negotiation with Tamil moderate political leaders within a unitary framework of the constitution. Accordingly, Tamil moderate parliamentarians had expressed their readiness to consider the District Development Council (DDC) proposal by the government and they contested elections for it in 1981.

### **Indian Support for Militants and Conflict Escalation**

Support of Indian central government to Tamil militants should be seen as part of Indian Twin-track policy of arming and training Tamil militants that was discussed in the preceding chapter. Accordingly, India supported Tamil militants by providing direct military training and arms through RAW, an Indian external intelligence agency, and Tamil Nadu state government that exceeded anything that may have gone on before. (see the attached sheet for further detail on the military training). However, the precise beginning of Indian training of Sri Lankan Tamil militants is difficult to date. According to some prominent Sri Lankan cabinet ministers, it (training) started before July 1983 (Krishna, 1999 p114: Keerawella, 1995 p291). Also, certain incidents taken place during 1982 indicates the Indian decision of involvement in the conflict. For instance, the arrest of two Tamil militants (who later would become the leaders of two prominent militant organizations- PLOTE and LTTE) by Tamil Nadu police on May 19, 1982, and the decision of India not to deport them to Sri Lanka even

though they were most wanted by the Sri Lankan government that offered one million Sri Lankan rupees for the arrest (Krishna 1999 p109). Whereas other studies suggest that it (training of Tamil militants) commenced soon after the 1983 ethnic riots (Greenberg, 1986: Pinnawala, 1993).

In the months preceding July 1983, Sri Lanka was rocked by a series of attacks and counterattacks by security forces and Tamil militant groups in the North. Supported by the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which virtually gave the security forces a free hand in arrest, torture, and disposal of bodies, the Jayewardene regime hammered away at the militant groups (Hoole et al. 1990 52–62). However, following the July 1983 riots the conflict began to experience large scale of violence as the effect of Indian military training and weapons that militants received was to vastly increase the number of trained cadres of the groups (Abraham 2006 p14) As Pandian maintains (1992), the first phase of the Eelam War started in 1983 when Indian Central Government and the Tamil Nadu State Government began to support the Tamil militants in Sri Lanka overtly. The then ruling party in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK, and the state's Chief Minister M.G.Ramachandran, came to be closely linked with the LTTE, while the main opposition party, the DMK, and its leader M.Karunanidhi became associated with one of the LTTE's main rivals, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO). Between late 1983 and July 1987, M.G.Ramachandran would publicly support the LTTE and even provide them with crores of rupees for their cause (Krishna, 1999 p124). Similarly, TELO was the first group that received attention of the Indian intelligence Services who organized the training (Abraham, 2006).

As a demonstration of strength Tamil militants attacked Point Pedro police station in January 1984. This was the first attack since the July riots. Again violence erupted in April and intermittent clashes were reported in May and June. In August, full-scale war between the government forces and Tamil militants broke out and it became apparent that both sides were employing new techniques as well as more lethal weapons. The guerilla war strategy of the Tamil militants consisted of five main components: the land mine warfare, the war of attrition, the staging direct attacks to security posts, attacking Sinhalese villages bordering the Tamil areas, and planting bombs in Colombo (Keerawella, 1995 p292). In 1985 attack on Chavakachcheri Police Station by TELO provided a demonstration of their abilities (Abraham, 2006). As Chandrasekaran (1991 p81), an official who involved in dealing with

the militants made the following reference to three militant operations in a book on the Sri Lanka crisis published in 1991: “The beginning of 1985 saw an escalation in attacks from both sides. The militant groups had also become well organized. The first major incident was the one on Chavekachcheri Police Station when one of the militant groups made a coordinated “taxt book” attack on a well defended position. This was followed by an attack on the famous Yaldevi(Colombo-Jaffna Express) at Murukandi killing 30 soldiers.The attack on the city of Anuradhapura in the heart of the Sinhalese area in May 1985 was a significant pointer that even majority community could be affected.”

Further another incident indicating the weaponry strength of militants is the 1986 July raid by Tamil Nadu state police to seize arms of the militants on the eve of SAARC Summit in Bangalore. Mohandas, police officer in charge for the raid, estimates the arms seized that day to have been worth Rupees 40 crores and included “Surface-to-Air Missiles, AK 47 rifles, rocket launchers, two-inch mortars, hand grenades, rifles and pistols and a very large quantity of ammunition including long-range cartridges, apart from powerful explosives” (1991 p146).

In turn, Sri Lankan government was resolute to pursue the military option, headed by the newly appointed minister for national security, Lalith Athulathmudali, continued alive and well into 1984, as the Sri Lankan armed forces hammered away at civilian and militant alike in the Tamil provinces. In an interview to the *Daily Telegraph* of London(On July 18, 1983), Sri Lanka President Jayewardene revealed his state of mind regarding the situation: “I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna people now.... We cannot think of them. Not about their lives or of their opinion about us.”

By August 2 1983, the Sri Lankan government had made frantic requests for aid or support to the United States, Britain, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. By the middle of August, he had explicitly rejected Indian “good offices” and his cabinet had rejected G. Parthasarathi's mission as special envoy from India (Muni 1993 p186–87). Moreover, the Jayewardene regime expelled all the TULF members of parliament by passing the Sixth Amendment to the 1972 Constitution, which outlawed the largest opposition party on grounds of its being secessionist (because they all swore by the Vaddukoddai resolution that calls for establishment of separate Tamil state).

### **Escalation of Conflict and Break down of Peace Negotiation**

One of the important negative outcomes that resulted from Indian support for the militants is the breakdown of the peace talks and related initiatives facilitated by India between Tamil militants, political leaders and the government of Sri Lanka. Though Sri Lankan government and Tamil political leaders showed some sort of flexibility on their position regarding the framework for final solution, as for the Sri Lankan government it had agreed to show flexibility in its position as it was pressurized by India to do so. However, although India was able to persuade and pressurize the militants to participate the peace talks she could not hold the complete leverage warranted to make them agree with the terms of the final political solution on them. Instead, militants, as they are now militarily capable, had adopted a strong and intransigent stand on the framework for final solution-they (four groups) jointly placed a four principles- later it became known as Thimpu Principles- as the framework for any future final solution to the conflict. While categorically rejecting these principles the Sri Lankan government continued its military assault on militants leading to the collapse of the Thimpu Peace Talks in 1985.

Since the collapse of the Thimpu Talks the demand of Tamil militant had become more entrenched, as they found themselves capable enough to fight Sri Lankan armed forces. They not only did not want to negotiate with the Sri Lankan government any peace deal that falls short of separate state, but attempted to sabotage peace talks between Tamil political leaders and the Sri Lankan government too. Even at the time of negotiation with the Sri Lankan government in Thimpu militants exploded a bomb directed at the Sri Lanka Army in Vavuniya (Abraham, 2006). The massacre of 150 Sinhalese civilians in May 1985 was such a strategy timed to jeopardize Indian initiative. Further, they intensified their attacks to target both state apparatus and civilians. In 1986, an Air Lanka Tristar plane was blown up at Katunayake Airport, killing seventeen and injuring forty. This was followed by a bomb explosion at the Central Telegraph Office, which killed a dozen people and injured more than a hundred. On Good Friday, April 17, 1987, LTTE massacred 127 civilians. Four days later a bomb exploded in the Pettah bus stand in the heart of Colombo, killing more than a hundred people.

Another negative effect of the Indian military support for Tamil militants relates to the stand and position of the Sri Lankan government vis-à-vis India's diplomatic initiative for political

solution of the conflict. This is mainly because of the Sri Lankan government's apprehension over India's role as 'impartial mediator' as it still continued to allow militants maintain bases and guerilla camps in the Indian soil that Sri Lanka interpreted as an indication of Indian intention to use Tamil militants as its Fifth Column against Sri Lanka. As Prime the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka angrily stated following series of attacks by Tamil militant that "We have listened long enough. We have waited long enough. The time has come to wipe out this cancer from our midst... Any friend who tells us to find a political solution [in an obvious reference to India] will be considered the biggest enemy" (Swamy, 1994 p232). In another occasion, as reported in *Rueters* (1990), Deputy Defense Minister of Sri Lanka publicly went on to say in the Sri Lankan Parliament that Tamil rebels are obtaining weapons from southern India. Second, Indian emissary, G.Parthasarathy's impartiality was questioned as the Tamil political leadership had become increasingly dependent on him for guidance and advice on its political strategies (Keerawella, 1995).

Therefore, the strong coincidence of events vis-à-vis the ethnic conflict before and after July 1983 in Sri Lanka and its impact on Indian politics made compulsions for India meant that the escalation to civil war also triggered a parallel escalation of India's role in the war, both as war-maker and peace-maker.

### **Operation Liberation versus Operation Poomalai**

Following consecutive break down of the peace talks and continued militant attacks ,and the LTTE's, the most powerful militant groups after decimating others, attempt to establish its own civil administration in Jaffna in 1987 provoked the Sri Lankan government's massive and vicious military response. Inaugurating the Operation Liberation that was directed at capturing Vadamarachchi, the focal point for traffic between India and the Jaffha peninsula and, as such, an important strategic point, from LTTE control with the eight thousand-strong Sri Lankan army went for the eastern edge of the peninsula, the President of Sri Lanka said, "This is a fight to the finish. Either we win or they win" (Fernando, 1988 p66). Operation Liberation continued until the end of 31 May 1987 after closing in on Jaffna by security forces having already brought several towns under their control and destroyed LTTE bases (Keerawella, Ibid p296: Behera, 1994 p567: Rao, 1988). However, while Indian central government issued a warning to Sri Lankan government that it would not stand by and allow Jaffna to be captured by the security forces. On 4<sup>th</sup> June 1987 India undertook a mission



called 'Operation Poomalai' to para-drop food supplies on Jaffna with 5 Indian airforce AN-32 transport aircraft escorted by four Mirage fighter planes blatantly violating Sri Lankan sovereignty (Behera 1994). Besides, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister offered LTTE and its allies gift of equivalent of US \$ 3.2 million toward the resistance they offered against the government forces (Tilekarante, 2006; Krishna, 1999).

Sensing that the Indian government was determined to assert itself, the Sri Lankan government did not retaliate to this intervention within its territory.

### **Indian Intervention and the Course of the Conflict**

Indian intervention in the conflict while strengthened the Tamil armed struggle weakened the hands of moderate political leadership that cooperated with the peace efforts undertaken both by Sri Lankan and Indian governments. This is to say that the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict was amenable for both political and military solution at its early stage in late 1970s. However, the potential for amenability to solution started to wither when the militancy phenomenon grew up with the support it received from India at different level ranging from individual sympathizer to Central government. Needless to say, the growth in militancy paralleled the growth of violence and conflict that diffused from Tamil areas to Sinhala areas to capital Colombo concentrating both military and civilian targets.

Whatever the goals and objectives of Indian intervention in the conflict may be, involvement by supporting Tamil militants chiefly militarily engendered grave impact on the conflict itself and its key actors alike who later found it hard to explore a common ground on which they can begin negotiation to reach a final solution. In other words, the positional gap between Tamil militants and moderates and the Sri Lankan government over the solution of the conflict began to increase as the protagonists hope for outside support increased. This was apparent when one of the protagonists to the conflict offered-whether under pressure or on own will- a negotiation the other was indifferent. It was same even in the offer of ceasefire.

Therefore, it is obvious that Indian intervention in support of the militants led to the proliferation of their military and strategic capabilities that in turn evoked massive and harsh military response from the government as a last resort to end Tamil militancy from the island. As a result, scope and dynamics of the conflict had vastly changed to mean that the conflict is

no more confined to particular locality or region within Sri Lanka rather its prevalence and impact transcend the national and regional frontiers.

### **Analysis**

To test the hypothesis that intervention strategies targeted at supporting opposition at the early stage of the conflict prolongs the expected duration of the conflict as against the above background, it proves hypothesis to be valid in its general content and contention. However, it also proves hypothesis to be lacking another related outcome of the same strategy that it turns, at least in the case of Sri Lanka, to be counterproductive and boomerang effect on the process of intervention. In other words, supporting militants, as a strategy of conflict management, at the early stage of the conflict to put pressure on the Sri Lankan government to negotiate seriously had only negative outcome that of conflict escalation.

Sri Lankan government was able to control the conflict if not to manage both politically and militarily in the late 1970s when Tamil militancy began to exist. However, geographical proximity and ethnic ties with Tamil Nadu and the resultant haven option at first had a significant impact on this Sri Lanka government's efforts and ability to control the militancy that was moving freely between Jaffna peninsula and Tamil Nadu. As such, the level and scope of violence was still limited to a manageable scale and spot. As it is being quoted that the President of Sri Lanka was confident that the ethnic conflict ("terrorism) would be over in three months if India disallow the militants to operate from bases in India (Pfaffenberger, 1987 p161). Later, however, As Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000) argues that the growth in rebel forces should have a direct influence on the course of the conflict, and that fractionalization should make rebel mobilization easier and increase the expected duration of war, the conflict escalated into a level in which both protagonists were in a position to hit hard each other almost on parallel basis regardless of type of target and mode of assault when Tamil Nadu state and Central governments of India became involved in the conflict supporting Tamil militants militarily and economically.

On the other side, as a direct effect of Indian support to the militants, TULF, a force of politics and bargain of Tamils with Sri Lankan government that accepted the DDC solution and was favorable to consider the framework of final solution that Sri Lankan government proposed, began to lose its preponderant position among Tamils to the militants that in turn

not only undermined severely the bargaining power of Tamil politicians as against the Sri Lankan government but also distanced the possibility of negotiated settlement of the conflict that India wanted and attempted to effect throughout its intervention in the conflict.

Moreover, it (strategy of supporting militants) complicated and often sabotaged the process of negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the TULF under Indian mediation in general and the Indian peace initiatives in particular. In fact, quite often, militant actions destroyed the prospects of negotiations instead of creating suitable conditions. Ceasefire that had been arranged as a prelude to negotiations were frequently destroyed by militant actions, as it happened during the Thimpu talks and later in 1987. The use of violence and threat of violence to put pressure on the Sri Lankan government was often counter-productive. By and large, intervention strategy of supporting militants by India not only led to the escalation and complication of the conflict but also arrival of new forces and dynamics that affect the course of the conflict. For example, according to Wije, since 1983 Sri Lankan Government's military expenditure began to increase constantly from US \$74 million to well over US \$842 million, a eleven fold increase (quoted in Pararajasinghem, 1997). Similarly, the combined armed forces (army, navy and air force) of the Sri Lankan Government which stood at 15,000 increased to 106,000, a seven fold increase (Pararajasinghem, 1997).

## **Conclusion**

It is possible to derive following conclusion concerning the outcome of strategy of supporting militants (opposition). First; it had changed the center of gravity of the conflict from moderates to militants. Second, it had changed the settlement framework of the conflict from minimalist to maximal (unitary-federal and confederal) Third, it had escalated level and scope of violence. Lastly, while level of Indian support for militants determined the level of militants' strength and violence it (Indian support) failed to have enough leverage warranted to nudge them (militants) toward negotiated settlement.

It can be inferred that the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka had the potential for short duration. That is, the government of Sri Lanka was in a position of persuading the Tamil political leaders to accept a political solution within the unitary structure of the constitution. Likewise, the former was in a position to control and suppress Tamil militancy at least in the beginning. However, prospects for early solution to the conflict turned to be low when the conflict

escalated with Tamil militants gained support both from Tamil Nadu state and the central government of India alike. Therefore, it is worthwhile to infer in the Sri Lankan context that external support for opposition on the outset of to the conflict is a predictor of increase in the hope of the opposition to continue fighting rather than stop fighting to achieve intended goals. As such, it predicts the prospects of undermining early serious political negotiation and solution of the conflict as well.

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