BETWEEN CONSOCIATIONALISM AND CONTROL

SRI LANKA

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For most observers today Sri Lanka is a country consigned to endless violence and the most brutal ethnic warfare witnessed anywhere in the past two decades. But it was not always so. Sri Lanka had made a smooth transition to democracy in 1948, and throughout the early years of independence and subsequently in the 1950s and 1960s, native and foreign ethnographers routinely praised Sri Lanka for cultural and political tolerance.

Only a short distance from the southern tip of India, Sri Lanka is an island country of great diversity. The largest group, comprising 74% of the population, is Sinhala Buddhist. Sri Lankan Tamils who speak Tamil, a Dravidian language, are the second largest group and make up 12.7% of the population. Muslims, who also speak Tamil, account for 7.1% (Oberst 1996: 141). In addition to language, religion and myths of origin, regional concentration has also reinforced separate ethnic consciousness among Sri Lanka’s ethnic communities. The northern Jaffna peninsula and the districts south of Jaffna (Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitiva) are almost exclusively Tamil. Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts in the Northeast have heavy Tamil pluralities. The Tamil Muslims are largely concentrated on the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka, yet some districts along this coastline are divided between Tamils and the Sinhala population. The rest of the island is Sinhala territory, except for the tea plantation district in central Sri Lanka where Tamils, who had migrated from India during the colonial period, form a majority (Pfaffennenberger 1990: 242).
The peace and tranquillity of the 1950s and 1960s began to fade in the following decades, largely because of the increasing centralisation of power and the denial of autonomy to the Tamil-dominated provinces under the growing influence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Ethnic tolerance between Sri Lanka’s Tamil and Sinhala population gave way to confrontation, communal violence and then civil war. Since 1983, the year that marked the beginning of the insurgency by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), Sri Lanka has succumbed to a bloody civil war that has killed more than 50,000 people.

Throughout these years of escalating violence, the Sri Lankan government has tried both force and accommodation, but these efforts were either too little or too late. Rejected by the LTTE and their counterparts among the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists, several proposals for peace have also been unsuccessful. The war between the government forces and the LTTE has acquired a momentum of its own, while a growing number of Sinhala and Tamils crave for peace. It is against this background of violence and popular despair that we need to view the latest proposals for power-sharing put forward by the People’s Alliance Government of Chandrika Kumartunge. In the 1994 elections she had promised peace and had received a mandate to end the war. Acting promptly on her promise, Kumartunge concluded a cessation of hostilities agreement with the LTTE in January 1995 and proposed major constitutional reforms with a regional devolution of power as its centrepiece (Australian Center for Sri Lankan Unity 1996). These were the most radical constitutional reforms ever proposed in post-independence Sri Lanka. Tragically, the proposals have languished since then and the rhetoric of peace has been replaced by that of war on both sides. By 1998 the war—the war for Elam III—had begun in earnest. Elam is the name given to the separate nation-state that the Sri Lankan Tamils wish to create out of Sri Lanka.

Why did the proposal for reforms fail? Was the design for constitutional restructuring flawed? Did other factors, such as opposition to the

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1 The first such proposal was a White Paper for the Establishment of District Councils in 1968. Several proposals followed in the subsequent years: the 1980 District Development Council Act, Annexure C prepared by the Indian government for consideration by the All Party Conference in Sri Lanka in 1984, the Indo-Lanka working paper in 1985, the 19 December proposal put forward by India in 1987, the devolution formula in the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in 1987, the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution in the same year, followed after a few years by the report of the Mangala Moonsinghe Parliamentary Select Committee in 1992. The Kumartunge plan to change the constitution is the latest in a series that have been proposed and failed.