



Identifiers:

ID: 371-25/DTN

December 21, 2025

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AI Tools: Artificial Intelligence
tools employed for scientific
content development, data
analysis, formulation, synthesis
and conclusions for accuracy,
validity and implications of the
work.

Conflict of interest:

Author accepts all potential conflict
of interest.

Funding:

The authors received no direct
funding.

Ethics approval:

No ethical approval needed for this
work.

Consent for publication:

Author is agreed to publish this
article.

Peer Review: Not peer reviewed

Blog Article

**THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE TAMIL MINORITY
AND THE SINHALESE MAJORITY IN SRI LANKA**

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Running title: Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese majority vs
Tamil minority

Keywords: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Black July
riots, Language and citizenship laws

Data Source: Archives, Biographies, Databanks, Encyclopedias,
Libraries, Metadata Registries, Reports, Repositories, arXiv,
Crossref, OpenAI, Wikipedia, World Health Organization,
Zenodo.

The conflict between the **Tamil minority** and the **Sinhalese**
majority in **Sri Lanka** intensified during the mid-20th century,
rooted in colonial-era policies and nationalist strategies adopted
after independence. During British rule, the Tamil minority
enjoyed disproportionate representation in civil services,
education, and administration, which created a sense of
deprivation among the Sinhalese majority. After **independence**,
political power shifted to the Sinhalese, who, in reaction,
implemented policies that politically and economically
marginalized the Tamils.

The “**Sinhala Only**” Act of **1956**, which eliminated Tamil as an
official language, sparked deep unrest among Tamils. In the
education sector, a “**standardization policy**” was introduced that
deliberately restricted Tamil students' access to higher education.
Additionally, Sinhalese settlers were systematically relocated into

Tamil-majority regions under state-sponsored colonization efforts to dilute Tamil demographics.
These actions were perceived by Tamils as part of a systematic ethnic subjugation.

These frustrations culminated in the formation of the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** in **1976**, led by Velupillai Prabhakaran. The organization's main objective was the creation of an independent Tamil state—Tamil Eelam—in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. What began as a nationalist self-determination movement soon evolved into an armed insurgency. In response to state oppression, the **LTTE** adopted guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, and political assassinations as core strategies.

LTTE holds the grim distinction of being the first organization to systematically use suicide bombers. A key example is the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in **1991**, carried out by a female suicide bomber. Similarly, Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed in an LTTE attack in 1993. These events tarnished the LTTE's global image, leading countries like **India**, the **US**, **UK**, and **Canada** to designate it a terrorist organization.

The LTTE's organizational structure was highly sophisticated. It maintained its own ground, **naval** ("Sea Tigers"), and air units ("Air Tigers"), along with an elite suicide wing known as the "Black Tigers." Beyond military operations, the LTTE also administered areas under its control with their own courts, police, tax systems, and educational services—leading some analysts to describe it as a "**parallel state**."

However, these achievements were marred by severe human rights violations, including the recruitment of child soldiers, the massacre of minority Muslims, and forced displacements. For example, in 1990, the LTTE forcibly expelled thousands of Muslims from **Batticaloa and Jaffna**, which drew strong condemnation and alienated many Tamils from the group.

Besides the LTTE, several other Tamil militant organizations such as **TELO**, **PLOTE**, and **EPRLF** were also active. But by the late 1980s, the LTTE had eliminated or absorbed most rival factions, establishing itself as the sole voice of Tamil militancy. Still, many non-militant organizations and political parties, such as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), continued to advocate for Tamil autonomy through peaceful and democratic means—though they were often labeled as traitors by the LTTE.

Despite its military strength and organizational discipline, the LTTE began to weaken after 2006 when the Sri Lankan military, backed by international support and modern weaponry, launched a decisive offensive. The war officially ended in 2009 when the **Sri Lankan Army** killed Prabhakaran and much of the LTTE leadership. According to the United Nations, over 40,000 civilians died in the final stages of the conflict, leading to serious allegations of war crimes against the **Sri Lankan government and military**.

With the fall of the LTTE, the armed phase of the Tamil struggle ended, but grievances concerning language, employment, education, and land rights still persist. A sustainable resolution demands that the Sri Lankan government earnestly pursue minority rights, inclusive political participation, and genuine processes of truth and reconciliation.

Finally, it's important to understand that the distinction between **“terrorist”** and **“freedom fighter”** often depends on political, historical, and ideological perspectives. While some regard **Prabhakaran** as a symbol of resistance against **tyranny**, others see him as a terrorist and mass killer. Therefore, the analysis of any such movement must be approached with historical context, ethical scrutiny, and international legal standards rather than mere emotion or bias.

Category	Details
Root Cause	Ethnic marginalization of Tamils through discriminatory policies (e.g., 1956 Sinhala Only Act, university quotas).
Conflict Period	1970s – 2009
Main Actors	Sri Lankan Government vs. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
LTTE Objective	Establishment of an independent Tamil state “Tamil Eelam” in the north and east of Sri Lanka
Total Deaths	80,000 – 100,000+
Breakdown of Deaths	- LTTE fighters: 27,000+ - Government forces: 23,000–28,000 - Civilians: 40,000–70,000 (incl. 40,000+ in 2009 final offensive)
Key Atrocities (LTTE)	- Black July riots triggered recruitment (1983, 3,000 Tamils killed) - Central Bank bombing (1996, 91 killed) - Expulsion of 70,000 Muslims
Key Atrocities (Govt/IPKF)	- Chemmani Mass Graves (1990s) - IPKF massacres (Valvettiturai, 1989) - Indiscriminate shelling in 2009
High-Profile Assassinations	- Rajiv Gandhi (1991) - Premadasa (1993) - Lakshman Kadirgamar (2005)
Child Soldiers (LTTE)	6,000 – 10,000 forcibly recruited (UN estimates)
Displacement	- Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): 1 million+ - Refugees abroad: 200,000+
Disappearances	20,000+ (mainly Tamil civilians and LTTE suspects)
Economic Impact	\$200+ billion in total damages: - Infrastructure destruction - Tourism collapse - Defense spending reached 25% of GDP
Psychological Effects	PTSD, trauma, and grief widespread in war-affected communities, especially among Tamils
Post-War Situation	- No political settlement of Tamil demands - Heavy militarization continues in Tamil areas - War crimes allegations remain unresolved
End of Conflict	LTTE defeated and leader Prabhakaran killed in May 2009

The **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** was a **militant separatist organization** based in **northeastern Sri Lanka**, formed in **1976** by **Velupillai Prabhakaran**. The group aimed to create an **independent Tamil state** called **Tamil Eelam** in the north and east of Sri Lanka, claiming that Tamils were being discriminated against by the Sinhalese-dominated government. Velupillai Prabhakaran was a Sri Lankan guerrilla and a major figure of Tamil nationalism, being the founder and leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Born: November 26, 1954, [Valvettithurai, Sri Lanka](#)

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Died: May 18, 2009 (age 54 years), [Mullaitivu, Sri Lanka](#)

Timeline:

1976 – LTTE founded.

1983 – Civil war begins (Black July riots: anti-Tamil pogrom).

1991 – Assassination of Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi (by LTTE suicide bomber).

2002 – Ceasefire agreement with Sri Lankan government.

2009 – LTTE defeated militarily; Prabhakaran killed.

Notable Actions:

Assassinated Rajiv Gandhi (1991) and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa (1993).

Controlled territory like a de facto state: had police, courts, tax system.

Banned as a terrorist organization by more than 30 countries including India, USA, UK

Tamil Freedom Fighters – Broader Context

Definition: “**Tamil freedom fighters**” is a broader term that includes **various individuals and groups** who advocated for the **rights, autonomy, and protection** of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. This can include:

Non-violent activists (civil rights, human rights).

Political groups like the **Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)**.

Militant groups, including but not limited to LTTE.

Tamil diaspora activists working internationally.

Ideology:

Tamil nationalism.

Opposition to **Sinhalese majoritarianism** in Sri Lanka.

Demand for **self-determination** for Tamils.

Methods:

Guerilla warfare, political assassinations, suicide bombings.

One of the first groups to use **suicide belts** and **female fighters**.

Ran a **naval wing (Sea Tigers)** and **air wing**

Defeat:

In **May 2009**, the **Sri Lankan** military launched a major offensive that annihilated LTTE leadership. The civil war ended after **26 years**, but with serious allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses by both sides.

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