Sri Lanka

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Lessons Learned:

- Suicide terrorism is not always religiously motivated.
- Women can commit acts of terrorism.
- Insurgencies can be defeated after protracted struggles.
Demographics:

- Sinhalese – 73.8%
- Sri Lankan Tamils – 18%
- Indian Tamils – 5.1%

In premodern times Sinalese and Tamil populations intermingle with one another and all originate from Africa (migrate around 60,000 BCE).
Arjun Appadurai and the Fear of Small Numbers

- “[S]ome degree of contrastive identification is always involved. One of these pairs of sets of identities often turns predatory by mobilizing an understanding of itself as a threatened majority. This kind of mobilization is the key step in turning a benign social identity into a predatory identity (Appadurai, 51).”

- Further, “The historical ingredients for this transformation or tipping point appear to include...a successful campaign of fear [by the minority], directed at numerical majorities, which convinces them that they are at risk of destruction by minorities, who know how to use the law...to advance their special ends (Appadurai, 58).”

- The second quote, while it does not describe the actual reality of the situation between the Tamils and Sinhalese it does describe the created Sinhalese reality between the two.
Anagarika Dharmapala

“Aliens are taking away the wealth of the country; and the sons of the soil, where are they to go? The immigrants who came here have other places to go, the Sinhala has no place to go. Is it just that the sons of the soil should suffer while the alien enjoy?...The ignorant helpless Sinhala villager is made a victim by the alien sharper who robs his ancestral land (Dharmapala as quoted by David Little in Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity, p 34).”
To quote S.J. Tambiah, “[t]he Sinhalese manifest the features of a ‘majority with a minority complex’ that is partly the product of Sri Lanka’s miniscule size, both territorially and demographically, and the nature of the exchanges with India, especially South India, that have been interpreted in certain (tendentious) ways...(Tambiah, 92-93).”
Logic of Divide and Conquer

- To solidify rule over colonial territories imperial powers often used “divide and conquer” strategy which involved...
  - Empowering a minority group such that they would become loyal followers.
  - The logic is that by giving a minority a powerful position that they would otherwise not possess and is dependent on the colonial power, the colonial state creates an effective agent.
Common views on Divide and Rule & Sri Lanka

- To quote the BBC, “The British colonial policy of divide and rule sowed the seeds of renewed tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities after independence. Tamils, although well-educated, were given a disproportionate number of top jobs in the civil service by the British (BBC, 2000, n/a.).”

- Other authors have made similar assertions, see for instance, Asoka Bandarage (The Sri Lankan Conflict: Broadening the Debate) and Neil DeVotta (Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka).
Perplexing Data:

- “[A]lthough [the Tamils] constituted only 11 percent of the country’s population, Tamils comprised 33 percent of the civil service and 40 percent of the judicial service...[t]hey further accounted for 31 percent of students in the university system (DeVotta, 115).”
- “The Education Ordinance of 1939 instituted a free education system and rasied the island’s literacy rate from 17 percent in 1881 to 65 percent in 1953, yet only about 14 percent of this literate population were conversant in English (DeVotta, 114).”
- “[I]n the state sector, in 1949, 41 percent of government recruits [were] Tamil and 54 percent were Sinhalese (Bloom, 50).”
Conventional explanation

- As discussed, the conventional explanation for why the Tamils had more civil service jobs in the colonial administration is that they were favored by a British “divide and rule” policy.
- The point of a “divide and rule” policy is to put a minority into a position of power that they would not otherwise possess. By doing this the colonial administration creates a group of people who are dependent on them for their power/livelihood and that will carry out the colonial desires.
- This makes sense, but, is it supported by history?
The real history?

- To quote Brian Senewiratne, “In education, the vast majority of the population who had no access to the Christian mission schools were seriously disadvantaged in both education and in (government) employment. The American missionaries had set up some outstanding schools in the Tamil North, which churned out English-educated people. It was they who got employment in the British administration. It was not a question of favouring the Tamils. It was a direct result of misadministration by the British (the inability to set up an adequate number of good schools in the South, as the American missionaries had done in the North.) It is in this setting that the anti-Tamil, anti-Christian, pro-Sinhalese Buddhist, movement arose in the mid-1950s, which has been exploited by every Sinhalese leader since to get into and remain in power (Senewiratne, 2001, n/a).”
How were jobs attained under the colonial government?

- “This ubiquitous notion was well grounded in fact. To work anywhere other than in agriculture some competence in English was a must (Brutt-Griffler, 215).”
- In other words, the Colonial Government was an equal opportunity discriminator, if you didn’t know English, you didn’t get a government job. Consequently, it didn’t matter whether you were Sinhalese or Tamil.
Why were the Tamils overrepresented in the civil service area, was it a product of the “divide and rule” strategy?

- “In that region [Jaffna/Northern Sri Lanka] missionary enterprise found a very receptive people. In that region alone American missionaries... were permitted to operate...The historical legacy of their endeavours was the creation of a superb network of schools and the production of generations of educated Tamils who were equipped for service in the lower rungs of the British administrative system (de Silva, 277).”
- “The fact of the matter is that the economic resources of the Northern Province are severely limited and as early as the last quarter of the 19th century it was evident that the increasing population of the region could not be accommodated in the traditional occupations based on land. The Tamils turned to state employment and the professions much more than to plantation agriculture and trade, in search of avenues of employment (de Silva 277).”
- “Indeed by the early years of the 20th century the Tamils had come to be singularly dependent on government service and precisely because they had no deep roots in the island’s plantation economy or trade for that matter, they were moved to defend their position in the public service all the more zealously (de Silva, 278).”
Why were the Tamils overrepresented in the civil service area, was it a product of the “divide and rule” strategy?

- To summarize, it seems unlikely that they were favored because they were Tamil but rather that the English language was favored and that because the Tamils proportionally spoke greater amounts of English they received more jobs in the Civil Service.

- Finally, 2 reasons why the Tamils knew English more than the rest of the colony

  1.) Northern Sri Lanka (Jaffna area) is less arable and therefore the Tamils did not get involved in the plantation economy as much as the Sinhalese from the South. As a result, they looked to the civil service for jobs.

  2.) The missionaries set up the best English-teaching schools in the North, and the schools in the south only taught the vernacular languages.
So what role did British colonialism play?

- Although, the “Divide and Rule” policies may have been irrelevant to development of national identities, British colonialism nevertheless, caused nation formation. Specifically it spurred, the Buddhist Revival.
The Buddhist Revival

- **Kandyan Convention (1815)**
  - Agreement the British sign with the Kandy territories that unites the island on the ground that Britain had to respect Buddhism as a legitimate religion.
  - Sinhalese end up unhappy with the agreement as they see favoritism towards Christian missionaries and the British eventually pull away from the agreement.
  - By the middle of the century the state adopts legislation essentially banning Buddhism.
  - Protests ensue and the British accommodate all but the Buddhists extremists in the 1870’s through reform.
The Buddhist Revival

- Racial Superiority Theories
  - British believed that some nationalities were simply better than others.
  - British writers conclude that the Sinhala language is an Aryan language and thus try to favor and protect the Sinhalese.
  - This is important because it strikes another hole in the idea that the “divide and rule strategy” was used in Sri Lanka.
  - Nevertheless, the Sinhalese still remain subservient to the British.
The Buddhist Revival

- At first the Buddhist monks have simple interactions with the Christian missionaries (i.e. they never sought public debates, etc).
- Indeed, “[i]n general, however, the monks were accommodating. They assisted the missionaries with translations, permitted use of public halls, lent copies of Buddhist scriptures, and gave itinerants a place to stay. This response however, only intensified the hostility of the missionaries. Gestures of generosity were taken as signs of ‘indolence, apathy, and indifference in all matters of religion (Little, 17).”
- Eventually, big debate happens in 1873, lasts two days, and crowd of overwhelming Buddhists decide that the Buddhists monks win hands down.
The Buddhist Revival

- Mahavamsa (Great Chronicle)
  - Tells of Sri Lankan history after Buddha flew over from India and drove away all the Yakkhas (demons). When the British discover it, they largely dismiss it as mythological. This further spurs the Buddhist Revival.
  - “The tradition of philological and historical scholarship that the British brought to nineteenth-century Sri Lanka created a new perspective on the Sri Lankan past, making history something one could argue over as well as be edified by... The addition of secular education had negative consequences for monastic education, but the pirivena system began to recover by the 1840’s and produced a stream of Buddhist monks educated in their own traditions. And once the literate population of the island was divided into these two groups – monks on the one side and the colonial elite on the other – the structure of ‘national’ awakening was put in place (Kemper 104).”
The Buddhist Revival

- Riots occur in 1883 and 1915.
- This brief account of the Buddhist Revival illustrates aspects of what led to contemporary Sinhalese nationalism.
Conclusions:

1.) Traditional idea that the British used a “divide and rule” strategy in Sri Lanka which hinged on the Tamils receiving more government jobs because they were Tamil is at best inaccurate, and at worst a commonly accepted fabrication to justify continued discrimination against the Tamils.

2.) Contemporary Sinhalese nationalism is best explained or at least partially explained by the Buddhist revival which also incorporated ideas of racial discrimination into its practices.

3.) Contemporary Tamil nationalism is best explained as a reaction to the Sinhalese when they assumed power and made Sinhala the official language.

4.) While British colonialism helped to solidify ideas of nationality in Sri Lanka it did not overly favor any of them.
Modern History

- Liberation Tigers for a Tamil Elam (LTTE) v. Sri Lanka Government.
- When British rule ends Sinaelese are suddenly empowered and take back the government.
Work Cited