

Case study of ethnic disharmony in sri lanka politics essay



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“ Human needs are a powerful source of explanation of human behaviour and social interaction. All individuals have needs that they exert much effort to satisfy either by using the system ‘ acting on the fringes’ or acting as a reformist or revolutionary. On this condition, social structure must be responsive to individual needs, or be subject to instability and forced change may be through violence or conflict.”[1]

According to the Seville Statement on Violence, violence was not human nature and it was simply a social construct. Violence was not genetic and it is an invention.[2]However, it has not been given much attention. Reason for this may be that it would be more difficult to justify the need for war if it is proven that no one is violent by birth. Further, if there is no natural aggression still, there is violence.

After four and half centuries of European colonial rule, when Sri Lanka became independent in 1948, it was then a Third World role model for economic prosperity, political stability and communal harmony. But six decades later, Sri Lanka is locked in never-ending political turmoil, its economy ruined by more than three decades of armed conflict and consequential devastating impact on life. This armed struggle then developed in to a full scale violent campaign against the state, leading to the creation of a grave national problem to which the state is yet to find a proper solution. This grave national problem has slowed down Sri Lanka’s political, social and economic progress in an unprecedented scale.

There is a fundamental question we cannot ignore when considering the source of conflicts. Do conflicts at all social levels emerge due to inherent

human aggressiveness? Or do conflicts arise due to the emergence of incompatible social institutions and norms? Why do we behave violently if violence is a learnt behavior? And how could such violent behaviour successfully be prevented, deterred?

Conflict resolution approaches focus on these questions. It needs to identify the sources of conflict to address the roots of the problem in order to obviate or preventing violence. Human Needs Theory is one important theory that focuses the roots of conflict. Entail in Human Needs Theory suggested that the direct result of some institutions and social norms which contrary with inherent human needs are aggressions and conflicts. The needs that are deprived by institutions and structures need to satisfy. In this backdrop this paper will look at how Human Needs Theory could effectively offer a new insights into finding solution to avoiding or reducing the ethnic tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Sri Lanka ethnic differences combined with a 'growing tension' between the Sinhalese and Tamils make up an ethnic disharmony. It exists based on the need of Sinhalese to achieve supremacy and Tamils to get equality. Based on the need to achieve supremacy, some of the former Sinhalese leaders have implemented policies that have been at times unfavourable to the ethnic harmony between the two major communities. The policies of major parties indeed meant to satisfy the Sinhalese voters, which naturally created an environment of distrust between the Sinhalese and Tamils[3]. Violence accompanied by these ethnically biased policies and subsequently

resulted in Tamil youths taking up arms to pursue an armed struggle to establish “ Tamil Eelam”. The country continued to be crippled by political instability and sporadic outbreaks of bloody violence. The civil war finally came to an end in May 2009 but violence embodied in the structures remains same.

Sri Lanka is now slowly picking up the pieces and faces difficult challenges ahead in post conflict economic, social and political recovery. Since there has already been too much blood shedding it desperately needs ethnic peace. The path is still wide open for a political solution. According to the conflict resolution theories it requires to identify the sources of conflict to address the roots of the problem and thereby avoiding or reducing violence.

5. The Human Needs Theory is one important theory which focus the roots of conflict. This Theory has emerged only in the last decades, and by and large as a response against these incomplete social problems. Human Needs Theory may provide worth full insights into the sources of conflict and thus probable resolutions. Unfortunately, it has often been ignored and neglected to apply as a source of conflict resolution to the ethnic disharmony in Sri Lanka.

BACKGROUND

In many cases, elite political leaders believe they can win support and strengthen their positions by mobilizing along ethnic cleavages. They anticipate that appeals to ethnicity are particularly effective in expanding their power. Leaders sometimes encourage followers to use crude violence – pogroms or ethnic cleansing, or exploit ethnic tensions in electoral politics.
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Outbidding opponents along ethnic lines is one of the strategies to win votes in (fragmented) societies that hold elections. This process frequently results in a polarization of the political system into ethnic divisions and a possible breakdown into violence. Marginalized minorities may suffer, emigrate, or fight back with the weapons of the weak terrorism and/or guerrilla activities. Elites manipulate ethnic identities in their quest for power, and these processes can either deliberately or unexpectedly trigger ethnic tensions.[4]

Ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka exist based on the desire of Sinhalese to achieve supremacy over Tamils and Tamils to get equal share in the political parties. Based on the need to achieve supremacy some of the former Sinhalese leaders have implemented policies detrimental to the ethnic harmony between the two major communities. In 1956, the victory of SWRD Bandaranaike on a platform of Sinhalese nationalism led to him declaring Sinhala to be the country's official language among other anti-Tamil measures. Communal tension and violence increased from 1956 onwards as Tamils became increasingly frustrated. Frequent communal violence against minorities deeply divided communities sowing seeds of enmity and bitterness for future conflict[5]. Then standardization policy to university admissions in 1972 allowed Sinhalese students to enter Science and Medicine faculties with lower marks than the Tamil students that snatched the opportunities of meritorious Tamil Students. The Constitution of 1972 conferred Buddhism as state religion and renewed the minority safeguard clause of previous constitution. On the other hand, owing to the aspiration to achieve equality, Tamil political leaders once made a demand for a Parliament with an ethnic balance of 50: 50, based on

the principle of a none domination demand for Federal constitution which was rejected.

Ethnic tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils grow over a period of time increased the disharmony between two major communities. Without any genuine effort in sight to settle the grievances of Tamils, their political party; the TULF began to agitate for a separate Tamil state since 1976 as an ultimate solution to the problem, and pledge to achieve it through peaceful means. The subsequent failure of the Tamil political parties to make any headway on this issue resulted the Tamil youth believed in taking up arms to pursue the struggle to establish “ Tamil Eelam”. This armed struggle then developed in to a full scale violent campaign against the state. This campaign has dragged on for nearly three decades.

Ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka highlight the violence that can result from the politicization of ethnic differences, particularly when one party systematically reacts to

another’s violence through retaliation. The LTTE believe that Tamil youths are compelled to employ violence because the successive Sri Lanka governments since independence have reacted violently to the demands of Tamil moderate parties.[6]Equally, the Sri Lanka government, controlled by the majority Sinhalese, justifies its violence against the Tamils and the LTTE as a means of safeguarding territorial integrity of the Sinhalese-dominated Island. The net result is the polarization of Sri Lankan society, with Sinhalese deeply distrustful of Tamils and vice versa.

PURPOSE

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This work aims to offer new insight as how Human Needs Theory could be applied to resolve the ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka. Firstly, the paper will be focus on Human Needs Theory and some of its scholars. Then consider the effectiveness and the faults or shortcomings of Human Needs Theory. Secondly, the nature of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka will be presented in brief and some of the main issues of the ethnic tensions outlined. After that Human Needs Theory will be applied to the dispute, to determine whether it may prove useful in shifting towards resolution. It will also study the issues of perception, LTTE's images and lack of trust when outlining to shift towards the resolution. The paper will finally conclude that how Human Needs Theory could effectively offer new insights into finding solution to avoiding or reducing the ethnic tensions between Singhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

7. Primary data will be collected through the intended survey to be carried out. For this purpose, interviews will be carried out with a cross section of members of the armed forces, general public as well as community leaders involved in both religious and welfare activities. Further, a questionnaire will be prepared and distributed among a sample of approximately fifty people within all the segments of the society mentioned above.

8. Secondary data will be collected through books, publications and internet.

LIMITATIONS

This study has to be conducted during a period where the writer is permanently stationed in DSSC Sapugaskanda and it severely hampered

mobility of write and would be a considerable impact in gathering data relevant to the study and reaching the expected number of respondents within the sample selected.

ASSUMPTIONS

The topic selected for the study is such that most people in Sri Lanka would feel qualified to contribute their opinion in this regard. Ethnic disharmony between the Sinhalese and Tamils have grown in to such a state that it affects almost all living souls of the country.

HYPOTHESIS

Human Needs Theory effectively establish new insights as a source of reducing ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. This hypothesis can be tested with the findings of the intended survey.