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SRI LANKA IN 1989: MAINTAINING THE STATE*

Sri Lanka's political crisis deepened in 1989 as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front or JVP) escalated its efforts to destabilize the government through a campaign of murder and intimidation.¹ In the newly created Northeast Province, the 50,000 strong Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) launched a series of offensives against guerillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Tigers sustained heavy casualties but avoided defeat by exploiting the mounting pressure on President Ranasinghe Premadasa to carry through on his election pledge to get the Indians out. In late April the LTTE began negotiations with the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) that culminated in a cease-fire. On June 1, Premadasa unexpectedly ordered the Government of India (GOI) to withdraw all of its forces from the Island by July 29, the second anniversary of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. When Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi refused, a diplomatic crisis that threatened to end in a military confrontation ensued. In the end Premadasa had no alternative but to back down. Although the two sides eventually reached an understanding about the timing of the IPKF's withdrawal, relations remained cool until the change in government that followed the Indian general election in November.

*The views expressed in the article are the author's own and do not in any way reflect his official position.

1. The author's sources for the facts and figures in this article include the *Island*, *Asiaweek*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and the *Economist*.

Turmoil in the South: Background

The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord: The People's Liberation Front (JVP), dormant since its failed 1971 insurgency experienced a remarkable resurgence after President J. R. Jayewardene signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1987. Among other things, the Accord contained important concessions to Tamil demands for greater autonomy and gave India a voice in the conduct of Sri Lanka's foreign relations. These concessions—bitterly opposed by the Sinhalese majority—and the manner in which they were negotiated and ratified to the JVP's resurgence in two ways: it created the perception that President Jayewardene was either unwilling or incapable of protecting Sinhalese interests from internal and external threats and it underlined the President's autocratic style of leadership.

The Accord specifically called for the creation of nine provincial councils to which a large measure of responsibility for government and administration would be devolved.² Recent attempts at decentralization, such as the District Development Councils Act of 1981, entailed the delegation of administrative functions to 25 District Development Councils under the center's direction without an accompanying transfer of responsibility and control. The case for Development Councils and earlier decentralization schemes was that they "rationalized" local administration by strengthening the coordination and bureaucratization of development planning and implementation at the district level.³ Sri Tanka Tamils had been agitating for considerably more: increased self-government. In contrast to the Development Councils, provincial councils were to be elected bodies invested with legislative powers. Each council

2. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution that actually implemented the provisions of the Accord was passed by the Parliament in November 1987.
3. See G.R. Tressie Leitan,, "The Reform of Local Government in Sri Lanka: District Ministries/Development Councils," in *International Perspectives: Comparative Local Government Country Papers*, Vol. 9 (Sydney: International Training Institute, 1914).

was to have a Board of Ministers presided over by a Chief Minister. A Governor appointed by the President would be responsible for implementing the laws passed by the council. Each province would also have its own judiciary and High Court. This scheme fell short of the federal ideal, as the President retained considerable discretionary powers with which to influence the provincial councils. For example, the Governor can dissolve the councils and hold new elections. In such an instance, the President would act as the Governor and Parliament would assume the responsibilities of the council. Although these contingencies permitting local government to revert to central control formally ensured the survival of the unitary state, the new system is significantly different from the old in that the transfer of responsibilities is safeguarded by constitutional provision delineating the purview of the center from that of the provincial government.⁴ Under the new system the provinces have the potential to exercise a great deal of autonomy if the center permits; the actual pattern of interaction between the center and province will ultimately reveal whether Tamil-dominated areas exercise the autonomy they seek.

The amalgamation of the Northern and Eastern provinces into a single territorial unit for purposes of administration and representation was the most important concession in the Accord. The Northeast Province would have one council and Chief Minister and its demographic make-up (70% Tamil, 18% Muslim and 12% Sinhalese) ensured Tamil control. The merger is the realization of Tamil efforts to create one geographically contiguous area encompassing the districts in which Sri Lankan Tamils are the largest community.⁵ Given their minority status on the island as

4. This point was made by Robert C. Oberst in "Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," a paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Conference, San Francisco, in March 1988.

5. Amparai District, part of the Eastern Province, is the exception. According to the 1981 census its ethnic composition is 41.5% Muslim, 37.6% Sinhalese, and 20.1% Muslim.

a whole, Tamils insisted on controlling an area that was large enough and sufficiently endowed with natural resources to exert influence over the center.⁶ An important caveat to the merger was that the inhabitants of Eastern Province were promised an opportunity to reverse it via a referendum to be held by December 1988 or one year after the council election.⁷ This provision was included largely to appease Sinhalese hard-liners and the Sinhalese and Muslim inhabitants of the east who did not welcome the prospect of living under Tamil-dominated council. In the Eastern Province Tamils make up 42% of the population, Muslim 32%, and Sinhalese 25%. If Muslims and Sinhalese vote *en bloc* to reverse the merger, as they are expected to, Tamils are only guaranteed of controlling the Northern Province.

Finally, as part of its agreement to "underwrite" the Accord, India sent a peace keeping force to Sri Lanka at Colombo's invitation. The IPKF's principal responsibility was to disarm the Tigers and to guarantee the security of Tamil civilians while the Sri Lankan army returned to its barracks. The induction of 50,000 Indian troops in a matter of weeks and an estimated 130,000 troops by the end of 1987 was the catalyst for arousing Sinhalese opposition to the government and the Accord; the IPKF's presence aroused the Sinhalese community's most visceral fears of invasion and political domination by India. This bi-product of the Accord, more than any other, provided grist for the JVP's effort to use anti-Indian sentiments to mobilize mass opposition to the government. As Premdas and Samarasinghe point out, what was particularly infuriating to the Sinhalese was that the "Indian invasion had

6. For an excellent discussion of why Tamils demanded a merger as part of any comprehensive formula for self-determination, see Amita Shastri's "The Material Basis for Separatism: The Tamil Eelam Movement in Sri Lanka," to be published in the February edition of the *Journal of Asian Studies*.
7. Provincial council elections in the northeast were postponed until November 1988 due to continuing unrest. The referendum too has been postponed and a new date has yet to be established.

become a reality through the ineptness or complicity of their own government."⁸

The Sinhalese Response: The depths of Sinhalese resentment toward these concessions can be better understood in the broader context of the community's deep-seated social and cultural insecurities; insecurities fostered by a selective use of religious myths and symbols that emphasize the country's national identity as coincidental with the Sinhalese-Buddhist sectional identity, and portray the Sinhalese as a people historically besieged by Tamil invasions from South India.⁹ These myths also present the Sinhalese as members of a distinct race, governed by rulers charged with a solemn duty of protecting the country as the "Island of the Doctrine," that is the refuge of orthodox (Theravada) Buddhism and the repository of its sacred values. President Jayewardene knew of the value of using religious symbols to legitimize secular authority. In 1957 Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike concluded an agreement with the leader of the Tamil United Front that included concessions to the Tamil minority on issues of representation and language. Jayewardene, then head of the opposition, led a procession to Kandy, site of the Temple of the Tooth, in protest. Jayewardene's role in mobilizing Sinhalese opposition to what was known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact even-

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8. Ralph R. Premdas and S. W. R. de A. Samarasinghe, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: The Indo-Lanka-peace Accord," in *Asian Survey*, 28:6 (June 1988), p. 681. Premdas and Samarasinghe offer a more detailed discussion of the Accord and the Sri Lankan perspective. For an Indian perspective of the Accord see Rao, P. Venkateshwar, "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: India's Role and perception," *Asian Survey*, 28:4 (April 1988).
 9. Donald E. Smith argues that the national myth or idealized history of the Sinhalese is that of reconquest from foreign occupiers, be they Tamils or Europeans. See Donald E. Smith, "Religion, politics, and the Myth of Reconquest," in Robert N. Kearney and Tissa Fernando eds., *Modern Sri Lanka: A Society in Transition*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1979). Also see Bardwell E. Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of power in Sri Lanka*, (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1978).

tually forced the Prime Minister to scrap the accord. After Jayewardene came to power in 1977 he pledged to introduce a "dharmistho" society, that is one based on Buddhist values and principles. More recently, after the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983, Sinhalese politicians began to frame the war against the separatists in the context of a broader heroic struggle by the Sinhalese to preserve their cultural, religious, and national identity against the Tamils, most of whom were now sympathetic to the goals and tactics of the militants. As the positions of both communities hardened, Sinhalese leaders maintained that any capitulation to Tamil demands to dismantle the unitary state threatened the existence of Sinhalese-Buddhist civilization on the island. In January 1985, two prominent Cabinet Ministers—National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali and Lands and Development Minister Gamini Dissanayake—placed garlands on the statue of a Sinhalese warrior hero, Dutthagamani, and swore a Buddhist oath pledging to save Sri Lanka and its people from "terrorism." Modern politicians have thus followed the tradition of Sri Lanka's kings by using Buddhist idioms and symbols to establish religious sanction for their authority. In the context of these beliefs and anxieties, the JVP's claim that the President had betrayed the Sinhala-speaking community and sacrificed the nation's sovereignty carried resonance.

The manner in which President Jayewardene negotiated the Accord was further cause for Sinhalese resentment. The president negotiated the Accord with a small coterie of advisors. The president's Cabinet and permanent members of the Foreign Ministry were not consulted during the negotiations and the full Cabinet was pressured to support the Accord once it had been completed. In November UNP Members of Parliament were faced with the unpleasant choice of voting for the legislation implementing its provisions or resigning.¹⁰ The President's tactics for ensuring

10. President Jayewardene had the undated letters of resignation of all UNP Members of Parliament and he intimated that he would not hesitate to use them if they did not fall into line.

ratification of the treaty reinforced the Sinhalese perception that the institutional channels for expressing dissent were rendered inoperative by the president's autocratic style of leadership and that the only means remaining to express this dissent was through extra-Parliamentary methods.

The strength of the JVP's chauvinist appeal was partially reflected in its support among the Buddhist clergy. Although the clergy as a whole did not support the JVP's tactics many priests could be counted as sympathizers and the *Sangha* criticized the government for its harsh treatment of the "patriots." However, it would be a mistake to say that the public took their cue from the Buddhist monastic order. Rather, the clergy's response reflected the ambivalence which generally characterized the Sinhalese response to the JVP. On one hand there was no groundswell of popular support that threatened to sweep the Front into power. On the other hand, the murder of UNP politicians and functionaries was scant reason for public grief. Many Sinhalese were quick to accept allegations that these victims were corrupt officials engaged in criminal activities such as the illegal felling of timber and trade in contraband liquor. Even if most Sinhalese did not support the JVP's terrorism, they agreed the Front was instrumental in dissuading the President from amending the Constitution to seek a third term and in persuading him to call Parliamentary elections for the first time in twelve years. Sri Lankans looked forward to the presidential election, scheduled for December 19, 1988, as an opportunity for a new government to secure a fresh mandate.

Elections : A New Mandate

The Presidential Election : The presidential election campaign was marred by an unprecedented level of violence and intimidation. The fact that 55% of the electorate braved the JVP's bullets to vote is a testament to the impact of 60 years of universal adult suffrage on political behavior. The leading candidates, Ranasinghe Premadasa and Sirima Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party

(SLFP) pledged to evict the IPKF if elected. Mrs. Bandaranaike also threatened to abrogate the Accord and void the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Premadasa was more ambiguous promising to replace the Accord with a friendship treaty, the terms of which he did not disclose. A third candidate, Oswin Abeygoonsekera of the Sri Lanka People's Party (SLFP), an SLFP splinter group, ran on a platform that advocated compromise on the ethnic issue and down-played India's intervention; Mr. Abeygoonsekera was rewarded with 4.6% of the vote. In the run-up to the election Mrs. Bandaranaike engaged the JVP in negotiations designed to bring the Front and other opposition parties into a grand alliance against the UNP. Bandaranaike and Premadasa were acutely aware that the JVP's ethno-populist message had struck a responsive chord among the Sinhalese and avoided any direct indictment of the Front in fomenting the violence, preferring to blame unspecified "subversives." At this point the JVP was in an excellent position to parlay its enhanced political status into Parliamentary seats and perhaps an influential role in an SLFP-led government.¹¹ The vaunted JVP-SLFP alliance, however, failed to materialize. Although the JVP agreed on certain fundamental issues—provincial councils the merger, and the IPKF among them—Mrs. Bandaranaike was not prepared to go along with the JVP's call for armed struggle if President Jayewardene did not submit to their pre-election demand to dissolve the government and appoint a caretaker administration. The JVP's subsequent decision to disrupt the election should have ended speculation that the Front was prepared to forsake violence and join the electoral process to advance its radical agenda of political and economic transformation.

Premadasa won on the first count by a razor-thin majority of 50.4%; Mrs. Bandaranaike won 44.6% of the vote. Had Mr. Premadasa failed to win a plurality of votes there would have been

11. Rohan Wijeweera, the JVP's leader, was a candidate in the 1982 Presidential election and polled a respectable 273,439 votes or 4.19% of the total votes cast.

a run-off. Although Mrs. Bandaranaike alleged that the UNP had resorted to wide-spread fraud and intimidation to secure its victory and sought to have the results voided by the Supreme Court, an independent election team of observers from SAARC countries concluded that despite several allegations of irregularities and the general climate of fear created by the JVP, the Elections Commission and the security forces carried out their duties in an exemplary manner.¹² In retrospect it appears that two factors decisively contributed to Premadasa's victory: his pre-election promise to provide Rs. 2,500 per month for two years to the approximately 1.5 million Sri Lankans on food stamps, and the JVP's success in disrupting the polls in southern districts where the SLFP had traditionally run the strongest. Premadasa's campaign was also well-organized and had the financial backing of powerful Colombo business interests that had benefited from the UNP's liberal trade and foreign investment policies. His success in distancing himself from the Accord and his sharp criticism of India's intervention, also paid election dividends. It appears that the Sinhalese community ultimately held President Jayewardene largely responsible for the Accord; the President acted as a lightning rod for Sinhalese resentment and, ironically, saved his party from serious damage in both the presidential election and the parliamentary election in February 1989.

Although Mr. Premadasa had been close to the pinnacle of executive power for twelve years, he had consciously cultivated the image of a political outsider and populist crusader. He is the first chief executive to come from a non- "Goyigama" or farmer caste. In education and social background he is removed from the Anglicized elite that has governed Sri Lanka since its independence in 1947. His rise through the party, from municipal councillor to prime minister and president, is a remarkable

12. *Report of Non-Governmental Observer Group from SAARC Countries of the Presidential Election of Sri Lanka, December 1988*, published by the Observer Group, 1989.

accomplishment given contemporary social prejudices and is largely due to his success in mobilizing constituencies that were traditionally overlooked by the center-right UNP. The electorate that has sent Premadasa to Parliament for the past 30 years for example, is in the heart of Colombo's shums. During his career, Premadasa has held portfolios with considerable powers of patronage. As Minister for Local Government under former Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake, Premadasa organized local development efforts and visited towns and villages in every part of the island. As Minister for Housing and Construction under President Jayewardene, Premadasa presided over a massive public housing scheme that created nearly one million homes for the poor. Indeed, the threat of revolt by Premadasa's supporters among the UNP rank and file, rather than regard for Premadasa's political skills, compelled President Jayewardene to select him over establishment favorites Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake to lead the party.

The February General Election : Preparations for Parliamentary elections began in earnest following Premadasa's inauguration on January 2. Scheduled for February 15, it was to be the first since 1977 and the first ever under the system of proportional representation mandated by the country's Second Republican Constitution promulgated in 1978. Under this system, 196 of the 225 Members of Parliament are elected in proportion to the number of votes received by each party in each of the country's 22 electoral districts. The remaining 29 seats are to be filled by candidates from a national list in proportion to the total votes received by each party. In the 1977 general election, the UNP captured 83 percent of the seats on just over 50 percent of the vote, an outcome that could not be repeated under proportional representation.¹³ Fourteen hundred candidates

13. In the 1970 general election the SLFP captured two-thirds of the seats in parliament even though it failed to win a plurality of total votes cast; the memory of the 1972 election rather than the outcome of the 1977 election was the impetus for changing the system.

from 19 parties were to contest the election; again the JVP and the LTTE were the notable exceptions. In the south the leading parties were the UNP, SLFP, and the United Socialist Alliance (USA), a coalition of left-wing parties. In the north and east Tamil moderates from the TULF and EPRLF vied with Tamil Independents who had the tacit backing of the LTTE.

There was no respite from the violence that marred the run-up to the December election. In the two months separating the Presidential and Parliamentary polls, 238 election organizers and officials from the ruling party and 14 candidates—8 from the SLFP and 3 from the United Socialist Alliance (a coalition of leftist parties) -- were killed. On February 14 the JVP declared a two-day curfew and threatened to shoot violators. Undeterred, 64% of the electorate cast their ballots. The UNP returned 125 members, the SLFP 67, Tamil Independents 13, and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)-Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) combine 10. The new President was thus saved from the fate of having to govern the nation in partnership with a Parliament controlled by the opposition.

Premadasa appeared well-positioned to arrest Sri Lanka's deepening political crisis by virtue of his personal background and professed commitment to "compromise, consultation, and consensus." A self-styled "man of the common people" Premadasa appeared to be in a better position than either Mrs. Bandaranaike or his rivals within the UNP to draw the JVP into the political mainstream. Ignoring the JVP's apparent rejection of electoral politics, he tackled the Front with conciliatory gestures. In January he lifted the emergency that had been imposed in 1983 and released 200 suspected militants from detention camps. A Deputy Inspector of Police who had been brutally effective in combating the insurgents in one some southern district was reassigned. In the first six months of 1989 the government repeatedly tried to engage the JVP in peace talks. Premadasa's soft approach was partially due to

the JVP and Premadasa's convergent interest in dismantling a political order dominated by an entrenched elite. The JVP's agenda, however, was revolutionary and perhaps nihilist. Premadasa's goals were narrower: to co-opt the disaffected elements of Sinhalese society the JVP claimed to represent and expand his own base of political support.

Premadasa assumed that the JVP was still pursuing a two-track strategy: applying military pressure to de-stabilize the government while giving Sinhalese leaders reason to hope that an accommodation could be reached if certain pre-conditions were met. As long as Premadasa entertained prospects of using the JVP for his own purposes, he was unlikely to pursue his military option. However, given the Front's unyielding stance in pre-election negotiations with the SLFP, its refusal to participate in President Jayewardene's "election games", and its effort to marginalize the mainstream left by assassinating the SLFP and USA's Parliamentary candidates, it was apparent that the JVP had either discarded the second approach of its two-track strategy, or was using it purely for tactical advantage. Not surprisingly, Premadasa's overtures were rebuffed.

In 1989 the JVP and its military wing, the Deshapremi Janatha Viyaparaya (DJV or Patriotic People's Front), disrupted the political and economic life of the country as never before. In the first six months of 1989 the JVP frequently brought the economic life of the country to a standstill through forced shop-closures and strikes and sabotage of infrastructure and public transportation. Government servants, UNP functionaries and loyalists, and employees of the state-owned broadcast media were the most frequent targets. State-owned tea factories and rubber plantations were also attacked in an effort to deprive the government of desperately needed foreign exchange. If the JVP had some reservoir of sympathy among the armed forces' rank and file it was depleted when the Front began targeting the families of soldiers who failed to obey its order to resign in mid-1989. Hampered by inadequate intelligence about the

organization's strength and movements, the army was strained to its limit to contain an insurgency that most guessed to have less than 2,000 armed activists. Unable to capture or shoot "subversives" in the act, the security forces began to round up and detain youths who fit the stereotype of a JVP activist: university students and unemployed youths were prime suspects. As the violence continued unabated, and members of the security forces and their families increasingly fell victim, these detainees were often killed in reprisal and their bodies, often burned beyond recognition, dumped on the roadside or thrown into rivers. Such was the recipe for a spiraling body count. According to official estimates approximately 12,000 Sri Lankans were killed in 1989.

The India Factor

Background: India had been an influential player in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict at least since August 1983 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi offered to mediate a negotiated settlement between the GOSL and Tamil parties after the anti-Tamil riots of July 23-29, 1983. Rajiv Gandhi maintained India's role as a third party to the conflict by permitting the Tamil Nadu government to arm and train the militants on Indian soil while simultaneously pushing them and the government toward a compromise. The Accord represented an important diplomatic triumph for the young Prime Minister and appeared to vindicate South bloc's policy of intervention. In an exchange of letters that accompanied the Accord, India was able to extract concessions from Colombo that addressed India's strategic and regional concessions but had little to do with the formula for resolving the ethnic conflict. Under the terms of this annex the GOSL was obligated to restore the Trincomalee oil tank as a joint venture with India rather than the U.S. firm it had been negotiating with. It was also required to seek India's approval before permitting the construction of a new Voice of America transmitter, and to suspend its military links with Pakistan and Israel, two countries President Jayewardene had turned to for arms and military training

when the United States and Great Britain refused. The terms of the annex confirmed Sri Lanka's suspicion that India's policy was influenced as much by its desire to correct the pro-Western tilt of President Jayewardene's foreign relations as to rally political support for Congress (I) in Tamil Nadu, where politicians and citizens fiercely supported the cause of Eelam. An understated yet significant feature of the Accord was that no Sri Lankan Tamil party was a signatory. The treaty was a bilateral agreement between the Governments of Sri Lanka and India, and made the latter a formal party to the conflict. India negotiated the devolution package on behalf of Sri Lanka's Tamils but neither the militants nor the TULF were party to the negotiations and were essentially presented with a *fait accompli*. The enormity of this mistake was realized only after the LTTE, a reluctant party to the Accord from the outset, rejected it outright in October 1987 and turned its guns on the IPKF. The Government of India had badly overestimated its capacity to persuade the LTTE's leader Velupillai Prabhakaran to accept the terms of a bilateral accord that fell far short of Tamil Eelam and implied continued Indian influence over the affairs of the Tamil-dominated regions of the country.

In November 1987 the IPKF succeeded in dislodging the LTTE from their strongholds in the Jaffna peninsula after 17 days of bitter fighting that resulted in heavy losses on both sides, and numerous civilian casualties. Prabhakaran and his field commanders, however, eluded capture and melted into the jungle to continue the fight. After consolidating its military position in the north, the IPKF began preparing for a military and political war of attrition against the Tigers. Unable or disinclined to vanquish them, the Indian army settled for keeping them on the defensive while the politicians and diplomats tried to salvage the Accord. India had no desire to become embroiled in a protracted guerrilla war, but it was obligated to neutralize the Tigers as a military threat and restore an atmosphere under which devolution could occur. The strategic dimensions of its Sri Lanka policy and the

prestige it attached to its new peace-making role also increased the GOI's stake in a favourable settlement. In the long-term India could secure its interests in Sri Lanka without maintaining a permanent military presence—a fact most Sinhalese appeared reluctant to accept—but it depended on cultivating a moderate alternative to the LTTE that was committed to implementing the provisions of the Accord and could also act as India's proxy, providing it with continued influence in the affairs of the North-east Province once the IPKF was withdrawn. Strengthening the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) was the focal point of this strategy and was to become India's major preoccupation through the end of 1989.

Political Developments: By November 1988 the IPKF had succeeded in restoring an atmosphere in the Northeast Province under which provincial council elections could be held; elections in seven other provinces had been staggered over the previous seven months for security reasons. The LTTE chose to boycott the election paving the way for the EPRLF to seize control of the council. In the Eastern Province the EPRLF, led by Varatharaja Perumal, and its ally the Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF) won 17 out of 35 seats; the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) took an equal number and the UNP took one. The EPRLF/ENDLF combine ran unopposed in the four northern districts and won all 36 seats, giving it control of the Northeast; Mr. Perumal was elected the province's Chief Minister. Despite lingering support for the LTTE and its efforts to disrupt the election, the voter turn-out was a respectable 62%. Clearly Sri Lankan Tamils were weary of five years of bloodshed and wanted to give devolution a chance. Interestingly, the returns of parliamentary election three months later also illustrated the latent strength of the LTTE in the northeast, particularly in Jaffna and Trincomalee. The moderates—the TULF, the EPRLF, ENDLF, and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO)—vied for the Tamil vote with “Tamil Independents” backed by the LTTE. In

Jaffna district the independents took eight seats, the TULF/EPRLF three. In Trincomalee the Independents took two, the TULF/EPRLF combine none. The TULF fared better in Batticaloa and Vavuniya districts. In all Tamil Independents captured 13 seats to the TULF/EPRLF combine's 10. Obviously, public support for the LTTE in its northern stronghold had not diminished, and was probably strengthened by the heavy-handed manner in which the Indian troops discharged their peace-keeping duties. In the Eastern Province political loyalties were not as strong and this gave the EPRLF an opportunity to create its own regional base of support.

In January 1989 the Indian government "deinducted" two battalions (about 3,000 troops) of a total force numbering approximately 50,000 as a gesture of goodwill to the new government. This was to be the beginning of phased withdrawal; further reductions were to depend on India's view of the fluid security climate. Although the LTTE had suffered heavy casualties in one and a half years of intermittent but bitter warfare with the IPKF, it was still strong enough to challenge the EPRLF and its lesser rivals for political and military control of the northeast if the Indians withdrew prematurely. After an Indian bid to open negotiations with the Tigers failed in March, the IPKF began cordon-and-search operations and attacked the Tigers' jungle camps, leading to the first large-scale engagements between the IPKF troops and the LTTE since the Indian assault on Jaffna in October 1987. India also accelerated its efforts to arm and train the EPRLF in preparation for a complete disengagement.

Colombo viewed India's efforts to strengthen the EPRLF with, first, ambivalence and then alarm. On one hand it recognized that a Tamil group which eschewed armed struggle had to be drawn into the electoral process if a political settlement was to last. At the same time it was apprehensive that the EPRLF, beholden to India for its creation and survival, would act as its surrogate. In

March 1989 Varatharaja Perumal traveled to Delhi for consultations with Prime Minister Gandhi without Colombo's approval. During his visit he also conferred with Indian Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao, Defence Minister K. C. Pant and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi.¹⁴ Later, he would further incense Colombo with his support for a long-term Indian military presence on the island. Given the shifting loyalties and perceptions of self-interest among the parties in the India-Sri Lanka-Tamil triangle, Perumal was ill-advised to stake his survival to the IPKF's continued presence. His actions heightened Colombo's fears of Indian-EPRLF collusion and tended to blind it from recognizing the convergence of interest in backing the EPRLF against Tigers. Unlike Prabakaran, Perumal has some measure of predictability and commitment to the electoral process.

The Diplomatic Crisis: Despite Premadasa's campaign promise for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF, the security situation in the south made it impossible. The army was already preoccupied with the task of trying to neutralize the JVP, and could not hope to simultaneously tackle the LTTE. In February, Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne announced that the IPKF would be withdrawn only after the Northeast Provincial Council had established a police force that could maintain the peace. At that time the government was determined to prevent the LTTE from filling any vacuum created by the IPKF's departure. In mid-March Wijeratne reiterated his government's position that the IPKF would not leave until peace was restored in the south and the army free for duty in the northeast if necessary.

Public confidence in Premadasa's ability to arrest the deepening crisis had plunged since his inauguration and he was increasingly desperate for a political victory that would seize the initiative from the JVP and the swelling ranks of his detractors. His failure to

14. Shelton Kodikara, "The Continuing Crisis in Sri Lanka: The JVP, the Indian Troops, and Tamil politics," *Asian Survey*, 24:7 (July 1989) p. 720.

deliver on his campaign to get the Indians out was partially responsible for his declining credibility and Premadasa cannot be blamed for trying to remove its cause. Whether or not the IPKF's withdrawal would have blunted the JVP's campaign is moot; Premadasa believed that the JVP could be accommodated and that the continued presence of the IPKF was the primary obstacle to a truce. In early April the President made a perfunctory appeal to the JVP and LTTE guerillas to surrender in exchange for a general amnesty. No one expected the rebels—least of all the Tigers—to respond to the President's offer.

Sensing the government's vulnerability and battered by the IPKF's March offensive, the LTTE accepted the government's offer to negotiate. The LTTE was as desperate as Premadasa to see the IPKF leave. In late April a preliminary round of talks were held between the government and the LTTE's London-based political adviser, Anton Balasingham in Colombo. A week later he was joined by Prabakaran's aides. These were the first direct talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government since August 1985 when the two sides met in Thimpu. This time, however, the Government of India was not invited to observe the negotiations. Negotiations continued through May and on the 28th the GOSL announced that it had entered into a cease-fire with the Tigers as part of a larger accommodation, the details of which were not disclosed. On June 1, Premadasa felt confident enough in this arrangement with the LTTE to demand the IPKF's withdrawal by July 21, the second anniversary of the Accord.

Predictably the Indians balked. From the GOI's standpoint the future of Tamil dominated areas was as much an Indian concern as a Sri Lankan concern and Colombo's attempt to reach a political settlement with the LTTE to which it was not a party was contrary to the spirit if not the letter of the Accord. The GOI was also worried that in exchange for a truce, the GOSL had secretly

agreed to give the Tigers a free hand in liquidating the EPRLF once the IPKF was withdrawn. India had an important stake in the EPRLF's survival; its vulnerability would not prevent India's disengagement but it could delay it. For Rajiv to have acquiesced would also result in an unnecessary election-year humiliation when the GOI was trying to gracefully withdraw its forces without giving the impression of retreat. The GOI's decision to begin a phased withdrawal of its troops while the security situation in the north-east remained unsettled was a signal that it was not insensitive to Premadasa's plight. Four battalions of Indian troops had been pulled out in February and five more were to go in April. Although, Premadasa desperately needed a victory, his efforts to create political capital at India's expense was self-defeating in two ways. First, it caused New Delhi to stiffen its position and suspend the evacuation of Indian troops; second, India's rejection of Premadasa's demand focused public attention on his vulnerability and ineffectualness, and, ironically, led to a resurgence in anti-government agitation. On June 5 Rajiv formally rejected Premadasa's pleas for a July 29 pullout. Days later thousands of Sri Lankans took to the streets in the first large-scale demonstrations in two years. The JVP, in an effort to steal the President's thunder, called for a complete withdrawal by June 14. As the deadline passed unheeded a JVP-enforced strike brought Colombo to a standstill. On July 22 President Premadasa bowed to the inevitable and in a letter to Prime Minister Gandhi, withdrew his deadline. The Indians had made their point—they would leave when ready--and in an effort to save Premadasa from further embarrassment, agreed to a joint communique, issued on July 28, announcing that India would resume the withdrawal of her forces the following day. On July 29 a token force of 620 Indian soldiers were evacuated and Foreign Minister Ranjan Wijeratne flew to New Delhi to begin the delicate task of negotiating a time-table for the IPKF's withdrawal. These negotiations continued for the better part of two months. In mid-September the Sri Lankan

Foreign Secretary and the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo signed a joint communique which declared that New Delhi would make "all efforts" to remove its remaining 40,000 troops by December 31. The intended date of departure was equivocal and provided no guarantee that IPKF would be out by the end of the year. The GOI had not departed from its basic position that the IPKF would be withdrawn based on its view of the situation in the north.

The JVP's escalation of its anti-government campaign at the height of the diplomatic crisis was a shock to Premadasa who expected the Sinhalese community to close ranks behind him. Given the Front's success in bringing the south to the edge of anarchy, Premadasa was left with no alternative but to pursue a military solution. On June 20 the government imposed a state of emergency. An island-wide curfew was imposed, thousands of suspects were detained and the universities—hotbeds of JVP activism—were closed on July 12 six weeks after they had been reopened. Under emergency regulations the armed forces were given the power to detain suspects without charge and dispose of bodies without inquests. August was the bloodiest month of government's offensive with estimates of deaths over 1,000. In addition an estimated 3,500 people had been arrested as subversives and 153 were reported to have surrendered.

In November the security forces captured the JVP's founder and leader Rohan Wijeweera and its military commander Upatissa Gamanayake. Both were later shot under mysterious circumstances and their bodies cremated. In the weeks to follow more of the Front's leaders met the same fate. The death of Wijeweera and others was sure to have a de-moralizing effect on the Front's activists and further dim their hopes of overthrowing the state. For the first time the government appeared to have gained an upper hand against the Front, although its claims of victory were premature. Killings attributed to JVP activists and reprisals by the security forces continued for the remainder of the year.

India's new Prime Minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, assumed office in late November with the stated intention of improving relations with India's neighbors. A familiar refrain from newly-elected Indian Prime Ministers, but Colombo found reason to be encouraged. Hopes that Indian troops would be out of Sri Lanka by the end of the year, however, were quickly dashed. India affirmed that the September communique was still in force but claimed rather weakly that a complete withdrawal by the end of the year was impossible for logistical reasons. V. P. Singh's style of leadership may change the tenor of relations with Colombo but the substance of India's Sri Lanka policy, shaped by regional concerns and center-state relations, will be marked by continuity.

Conclusion

The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord renewed hope that Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict could be resolved through a negotiated settlement and without sacrificing the integrity of the country's democratic institutions. The violence of the past two and a half years have badly undermined this hope. In 1989 resisting the JVP's efforts to undermine the state and the diplomatic confrontation with India were of more immediate concern to the Government of Sri Lanka than the ethnic issue. However, once law and order is restored in the south and the IPKF leaves, the dilemma that confronted President Jayewardene promises to bedevil his successor. That is some form of devolution is necessary to redress long-standing Tamil grievances and to undermine the appeal of separatism. In addition a lasting settlement would surely have to include a permanent merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Unfortunately, the Sinhalese community's fear that compromise will stimulate rather than defuse Tamil demands for full autonomy and eventually independence, and the readiness of the SLFP to exploit these fears have made even modest concessions impossible except through executive fiat enforced by autocratic measures. In 1987 President Jayewardene was forced to resort to such means, with grave results. It

remains to be seen whether the Sinhalese community and its religious leaders will draw the correct lessons from the past two years and allow Sinhalese politicians to make the concession necessary to maintain the state.

The improving security climate in the south and the escalation of internecine warfare between the LTTE and the EPRLF at the end of 1989 promises to return the ethnic issue to the top of the government's agenda. The terms of Colombo's pact with the LTTE have not been made public but the suspicion remains that in exchange for a truce with the government, Colombo gave the LTTE assurances that it would assume the role of spectator while it settled old scores with its rivals and positioned itself to take political control of the northeast once the IPKF was withdrawn. This suspicion contributed to the GOI's decision to train and arm the Tamil National Army (TNA). The TNA was ostensibly established to fill the security vacuum that would be left in the wake of the departing Indian army but Colombo and the LTTE viewed it as little more than the EPRLF's military wing. The TNA is largely comprised of young men, many of them teenagers, who have been forcibly conscripted. They are well-armed but ill-trained and lack the Tigers' experience and determination. In December the Tigers mauled the TNA in clashes in the eastern districts from which the IPKF had withdrawn. It appears that once the Indian withdrawal is complete, the fate of the northeast will once again be in Prabakaran's hands. If this causes Colombo any discomfort, it does not show. In December the Tigers announced the creation of a political wing—the People's Front of the Liberation Tigers—in anticipation of new council elections. However, the LTTE's most recent efforts to liquidate the opposition before its popularity can be put to the test, does not bode well for any one expecting the Tigers to retire their rifles and relenquish their fate to the ballot box.