

Sri Lanka
Youth Unrest and Inter-group
Conflict

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Two considerations provide the main impulse for this study. The first of these is the scant attention that is paid in existing scholarly writings to the connection between ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the phenomenon of ‘youth unrest’, despite the importance accorded in many recent works on major political turbulences elsewhere in the world to the demographic and sociological characteristics of the youth. The second is the fact that Sri Lankan conflict studies tend to treat the causal connections of the secessionist campaign led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE/’Tigers’) as being distinct from those of the insurrections led by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP – literally, ‘People’s Liberation Front’) in the Sinhalese segment of the country’s population in 1971 and 1986-89, perceiving the former as an exemplification of ‘ethnic conflict’, and the latter as essentially a ‘class conflict’.

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This distinction is, of course, not devoid of substance. The secessionist insurrection which began in earnest in the mid-1980s did represent the culmination of a long drawn out process of estrangement of relations between two of the main ethnic groups – Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils constituting, respectively, 74 per cent and 12.6 per cent of the country's population at that time. The process was characterised perpetually by confrontational politics at the leadership levels of the two communities, and sporadically by outbursts of communal clashes in areas of mixed ethnicity when, more often than not, Tamils became the target of violence perpetrated by rampaging Sinhalese mobs. The most barbaric and destructive among such episodes of communal violence occurred in July 1983, and had the catalytic impact of converting nascent and factionalised Tamil militancy into a full scale campaign of secessionism over which, with the passage of time, a single, tight-knit group established its hegemony.

This appears in sharp contrast to the processes that preceded the rebellions led by the JVP. The insurrection of 1971, intended to bring about a socialist revolution through the capture of state power with recourse to violence and terror, took place within a few months of the formation of a new Government by a coalition of parties that had pledged to bring about a socialist transformation of society, and had, indeed, received the qualified backing of the JVP during the election campaign.

In the late 1980s, the theme of the JVP-led insurrection was the liberation of Sri Lanka from the yoke of foreign domination, following a direct armed Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, the implications of which, on the nation's sovereignty, remained hazy but ominous throughout that time.

The prominence accorded to these contrasts has, however, tended to obscure certain facts that relate crucially to ethnic differentiations and class stratifications providing the backdrop of these upheavals. Foremost among these is the fact that, although certain grievances of the Tamils, as articulated by their spokesmen, were/are genuine enough,¹ the perception of

¹ The most genuine among these grievances pertained to the denial of a fair share of state-sector employment to the Sri Lanka Tamils from about the early 1960s, and the inadequacy of provisions made for the use of Tamil as a language of Government administration. In addition, the procedures followed in selecting

‘majoritarian dominance’ of the Sri Lankan polity, and the consequent discrimination and oppression of the Tamil minority as propagated by its political leadership, has not been devoid of incongruities. For instance the alleged discrimination was not reflected (as it ought to have been, if there was such discrimination and oppression over several decades) in any of the socio-economic parameters of comparative living standards among the Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils and the Muslims, at least up to about the mid-1980s. To cite a general conclusion which I have derived through a detailed analysis of a mass of data pertaining to this issue:

(E)xcept when the ‘Indian Tamils’ of the plantation sector (who still suffer from various deprivations compared to other groups) are taken into account, up to about the end of the third decade after independence, socio-economic stratifications – variations in respect of wealth, income, power and privilege, or dichotomies such as those of ‘haves versus have-nots’ or ‘exploiter versus exploited’ – did not exhibit significant correspondences to the main ethnic differences of the country. And, there was certainly no economically ‘dominant’ ethnic group. Accordingly, for an analysis of the socio-economic causes for these major political upheavals, one has to look for differences of the type that could produce alienations, resentments and hostilities *within* each of the ethnic groups.²

Yet another major deficiency found in the ‘conventional’ interpretations of large-scale political conflict in Sri Lanka lies in

students for university admission during the 6-year period commencing 1971 had the effect of curtailing the number of Tamil students admitted to prestigious professional courses such as Medicine and Engineering.

² G.H. Peiris, *Sri Lanka: Challenges of the New Millennium*, Kandy: Kandy Books, 2006, p. 436. The data analysis referred to is presented in pp. 413-38. My conclusions find strong confirmation in Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, “Socio-Economic Inequality and Ethno-Political Conflict: Some Observations from Sri Lanka,” *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 14 No. 3, 2005, pp. 341-56 – a publication by a Tamil scholar based on his doctoral dissertation – in which he states: “The most striking conclusion (borne out by his analysis) is that the intensification of inter-ethnic political conflict in Sri Lanka did not coincide with large or growing inter-ethnic socio-economic inequality”.

the scant attention that has been devoted to similarities identifiable among the militant organisations of the two ethnic groups. To refer briefly to the aspects that have tended to be glossed over in the available writings, there is first, the fact that the origin of insurrectionary politics among both communities took place in the late 1960s, when several small groups espousing 'liberation' through armed confrontation of the existing political order came to be formed. The significance of this temporal correspondence should be appreciated in the context of the aggravating economic problems of that time, which affected all ethnic groups – notably soaring unemployment among the youth entering the job market, the large majority among them having had their formal education in the medium of their mother-tongue – *Sinhala* or *Thamil* – and possessing no communication skills in English.

In both communities, moreover, the formation of militant groups at this point of time also represented the earliest manifestations of rejection of the English-educated first generation of the post-independence political leadership that had been drawn overwhelmingly from the land-owning and professional classes. The pioneers of militant politics at the nascent stages of their liberation campaigns, and the majority of their rank-and-file during subsequent growth, consisted of young men and women from the lower-middle social strata in rural areas, and, typically, from what could be referred to as 'subordinate' caste groups, and not from the 'dominant' castes of the two communities (Sinhala and Tamil) – the *Goigama* and the *Vellala* – that are believed to constitute more than 60 per cent of their respective totals.

Since group formation among the Tamil militants remained in a state of flux at least up to about the early 1980s it is not possible to discern among them a coherent stance in respect of political doctrine and mobilisation strategy. On the other hand, the JVP was led by diehard Marxists whose operational modalities placed considerable emphasis on building up their rank-and-file through processes of conversion to what they proclaimed as 'Marxist-Leninist ideology'. This contrast, however, should not divert attention from the fact that socialism did have considerable appeal to some of the more prominent Tamil militants – among them, Uma Maheswaran (the LTTE

leader Prabhakaran's closest comrade-in-arms until the early 1980s) and Anton Balasingham (the principal spokesman for the LTTE for well over twenty years) – especially in the early stages of their movements. Apart from that, two of the larger organisations of Tamil militants – Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), which had a fairly large support-base among university students and in expatriate Tamil communities, and Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the outfit that was powerful enough to remain the arch rival of the LTTE well into the 1990s, had loudly proclaimed socialist commitments.³

The 'youth perspective' accorded prominence in the present study is not intended to detract from the fact that the Sri Lankan insurrections have been multi-dimensional in their causes and effects. One of the advantages which could be claimed for the present approach, however, is that it enables the recognition of links that exist between the insurrectionary upheavals, on the one hand, and various other deviations, both from the principles of democratic governance as well as basic ethical norms of civilised society, gaining prominence in the affairs of the country, on the other. Even more importantly, the deficiencies in the conventional interpretations of insurrectionary violence in Sri Lanka have had a profound impact on the search for strategies of conflict resolution, which, all along, had a misplaced preoccupation with statutory devices for power-sharing at elite levels as a means of easing inter-group tensions, in apparent disregard of the fact that such devices are unlikely to have a tangible impact on the real causes that have converted inter-group disharmony and rivalry into violent conflict.

Demography of 'Youth' and Political Conflict

In the context of the sharp upsurge of violent inter-group conflict in most parts of the world witnessed during the 1980s and

³ One of several references to this in M. R. Narayan Swamy *Tigers of Lanka: From Boys to Guerrillas* Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 1994, p. 28, states: "In 1979, he (Anton Balasingham) had written the LTTE's first major theoretical work called 'Towards Socialist Eelam'. It came out in Tamil and then in English, and was an instant hit among the Jaffna intelligentsia."

1990s, there has been a proliferation of research studies that seek to explain such political turbulences and to formulate models and other conceptual paradigms that could be employed in both prediction as well as resolution of conflict. One of the outcomes of these attempts is the emergence of the theoretical postulate that a ‘youth bulge’ in the population of a country – i.e. a relatively large segment of its population in the age cohorts representing the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood – over a given time-span, exhibits a tendency to coincide with extraordinarily high levels of socio-political instability and violence.

Research in history, demography and social psychology conducted over almost four decades has contributed to the development of the ‘theory’ of the youth bulge, as it is being applied in recent studies of conflict and even in official policy formulation, in relation to insurrections and inter-group confrontations. The earliest among the investigations into the responses of young men and women to social stresses and strains dates back to the late-1960s, when there were widespread youth protests, often with recourse to violence, in some of the developed countries of the West.⁴ Some of these studies tended to converge on the theme of instability caused by a dramatic upsurge of the youth population – in turn, a consequence of the post-war baby boomers then being in transit towards adulthood. The French social scientist Gaston Bouthoul reinforced these ideas with a historical dimension based on European experiences in which he identified a temporal correspondence between extraordinary expansions of populations in the age cohorts of 18-35 years, on the one hand, and political turbulences such as those associated with major wars and social upheavals, on the other.⁵ It is essentially an elaboration of this historical perspective that one finds in the following passage extracted from Samuel P Huntington’s famous but controversial *Clash of Civilizations*:

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4. The better known among these studies are: Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, Los Angeles: UCLA, 1968; Herbert Moller, “Youth as a Force in the Modern World”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, 1968, pp. 238-60; and Lewis S Feuer, *The Conflict of Generations: The Character and Significance of Student Movements*, London: Heinmann, 1969.
 5. This summary of Bouthoul’s thematic contention has been extracted from an English synopsis of his *L’infanticide différé*, Paris, 1970.

Young people are the protagonists of protest, instability, reform, and revolution. Historically, the existence of large cohorts of young people has tended to coincide with such movements. The 'Protestant Reformation' ... is an example of one of the outstanding youth movements in history. Demographic growth ... was a central factor in the two waves of revolution that occurred in Eurasia in the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. A notable expansion of the proportion of youth in Western countries coincided with the 'Age of Democratic Revolution' in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In the 19th century successful industrialization and emigration reduced the political impact of young populations in European societies. The proportion of youth rose again in the 1920s, however, providing recruits to fascist and other extremist movements. Four decades later the post-World War II baby boom generation made its mark politically in the demonstrations and protests of the 1960s. (More recently) ... the youth of Islam have been making their mark in the Islamic Resurgence. As the Resurgence got under way in the 1970s and picked up steam in the 1980s, the proportion of youth (that is, those of fifteen to twenty-four years of age) in major Muslim countries rose significantly. ... In many Muslim countries the youth bulge peaked in the 1970s and 1980s; in others it will peak in the next century.⁶

Writings by Gunnar Heinsohn that focus on demographic changes and political upheavals in Europe from late medieval times up to the end of the First World War, despite their replication of historical sweeps similar to those made by Huntington, also deserve specific mention for their incorporation of an interesting socio-psychological dimension to the application of the youth bulge theory in studies of conflict. The essence of his postulate is that, in societies featured by a burgeoning youth population and by the failure of economic opportunities to keep

6. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

pace with the rate of expansion of this population segment, a large proportion of youth find themselves, in Heinsohn's words, "demographically superfluous" – i.e. dependent, denied acceptable employment, marginalised in society and deprived of sex-life that conforms to social norms. This condition, according to Heinsohn, experienced in Europe over several spells since about the early 16th Century, and being experienced at present in many of the less developed countries (especially those of the Islamic world), provides impetus to war and other forms of collective violence in two specific forms – a tendency, on the one hand, of large numbers of youth to readily engage in violence as a means of self-assertion, release from psychological stresses and escape from their superfluity, and, on the other, of the willingness of adult society to legitimise such violence on the basis of a religious or ideological cause.⁷

With the emergence of intra-state violence based on ethnic rivalry as a major phenomenon of global politics of the recent past, which has been characterised by similar patterns and trends, often replicated in seemingly disparate situations, certain studies aimed at identifying potential sources of trouble at an international plane incorporated the demographic parameter of the youth bulge into their model constructs. For instance, through a correlative analysis of data on youth unemployment and political unrest, Braungart reached the conclusion that "...unemployment (a consequence mainly of economic stagnation) in any society weakens the political system's legitimacy and stability, (and) such conditions produce a climate of radicalisation particularly among unattached youth who have least to lose in the gamble and struggle for revolutionary gains."⁸ As a statistical investigation, a

7. The best known work by Gunnar Heinsohn is the volume titled *Soehne und Weltmacht: Terror im Aufsteig und Fall der Natione (Sons and World Power: Terror in the Rise and Fall of Nations)*, Zurich: Orell & Suessli, 2003. He is also credited with the authorship of several hundred articles. The essence of Heinsohn's ideas pertaining to the theory of the 'youth bulge' presented here has been derived from English translations of extracts from this volume and from three of his other writings. – "Population, Conquest and Terror", 2005; "A Shift of Religion to Youth Bulge", 2006; and "Demography and War", 2007 – accessed through the Internet.

8. Richard G. Braungart, "Historical and Generational Patterns of Youth Movements: A Global Perspective", *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 7 No. 1: 1984, pp. 3-62. See also Richard G Braungart & M Margaret, "Youth

study by Henrik Urdal, extending as it does over the period between 1950 and 2000, and covering all sovereign states and several dependencies, is much wider in scope and more methodologically elegant than the others of this type.⁹ Testing a series of interrelated hypothesis pertaining to the phenomenon of the youth bulge, Urdal concluded that, “(T)he study finds robust support for the hypothesis that youth bulges increase the risk of domestic armed conflict, and especially so under conditions of economic stagnation.” Urdal’s conclusion is also in harmony with Goldstone’s contention that the rapid increase in the number of educated youth seems to precede episodes of political upheaval.¹⁰

It is of interest to compare the size of Sri Lanka’s ‘youth’ population, estimated by employing the same definitional frame used in Urdal’s study (i.e. number in the age-group of 15-24 years as a percentage of the total population of 15 years and above), with the size-measurements derived by him on countries that occupy the upper end of his youth bulge range. These latter measurements (in descending order) are: Zambia, 42.1 per cent; Kenya, 39.8 per cent; Cote d’Ivoire, 37.9 per cent; Burkina Faso, 37.8 per cent; Syria, 37.5 per cent; Zimbabwe, 37.4 per cent; Tanzania, 37.1 per cent; Yemen, 37.8 per cent; Niger, 36.7 per cent; Togo, 36.5 per cent; Guinea, 36.0 per cent; Iran, 35.6 per cent; Honduras, 35.5 per cent; and Jordan, 35.0 per cent. The corresponding values for Indonesia and India are, respectively, 28.5 per cent and 28.2 per cent.

That the Sri Lankan estimates after the mid-1980s (Table I) are based on enumerations that do not cover the venues of the secessionist war in the north-east of the country must be taken note of in comparing them with those of the other countries.

Movements in the 1980s: A Global Perspective,” *International Sociology*, Vol. 5 No. 2: 1990, pp. 1-24.

9. Henrik Urdal, “The Devil in the Demographics: The Effect of Youth Bulges on Domestic Armed Conflict, 1950-2000,” *Social Development*, Paper No. 14, Washington DC: World Bank, 2004.
10. Jack A. Goldstone, “Demography, Environment and Security,” in *Environmental Conflict*, Boulder Co: Westview, 2001, p. 95.

Table 1. The Demographic ‘Youth Bulge’ of Sri Lanka

Year	Population of >15 ‘000	Population of 15-24 ‘000	Population 15-24 (per cent of >15 population)
1975	8,236	2,798	34.0
1980	8,994	3,055	33.9
1985	10,251	3,324	32.4
1990	11,011	3,583	32.5
1995	11,752	3,824	32.5
2000	12,545	4,082	32.5
Based on Department of Census & Statistics			

Definition and Enumeration of ‘Youth’ in Sri Lanka

In several studies to which reference has been made above, simple demographic definitions (that vary from one study to another – 18 to 35 years, or 15 to 24 years etc.) based exclusively on the age structure of the population have been employed for the purpose of defining and enumerating the ‘youth’. The measurement of the youth bulge on the basis of an age-cohort framework, uniformly applied to all countries, though perhaps permissible in large-scale comparative investigations such as that by Urdal, is not devoid of a methodological flaw which stems from the fact that, in reality, youth is a ‘post-childhood’ and ‘pre-adulthood’ phase of life, the duration and characteristics of which vary from one society to another. While in traditional agrarian societies it was brief, lasting only over a few post-pubertal years even in the case of males, it tended to become prolonged under the demands and opportunities associated with processes of modernisation. In consequence, in many societies of today ‘youth’ represents ‘adolescence’ extended over many years (even into the fourth decade of life) beyond physiological maturation (usually the early teens). Persons in this phase of life have to endure not only the socio-economic challenges which, in many low-income societies, take the form of highly restricted means of upward social mobility, unemployment, excessive adult control, lack of scope for

entertainment and sexual freedom, but also, more generally, the non-fulfilment of aspirations that are constantly elevated through exposure to unattainable life-styles and social mores by a globalised media.

Thus, in measuring the youth bulge in countries like Sri Lanka, it is necessary to take into account not merely the age structure of the population but other criteria that pertain to the recognition of 'youth' as the transitional phase of life between childhood through adolescence to adulthood. One such criterion which lends itself to fairly precise measurement is marriage – significant, especially on account of the fact that, in Sri Lanka (as elsewhere in most parts of Asia), among the more tradition-inclined segments of society, it is marriage that signifies a person's entry into fully-fledged adult status. In the case of males, the capacity to be self-supporting, being a matrimonial prerequisite, is, in that sense, an indicator of personal economic independence. In the social ethos of these societies, moreover, it is marriage that invariably represents the end of the post-pubertal psychological stresses that feature the life of adolescents and unmarried young adults.

Table 2.1. Changes in the Unmarried Population Ratio among Young Adults, Sri Lanka 1946-1981				
Unmarried population as a percentage of total population in the cohort				
Males				
Year	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years
1946	80.5	43.4	22.4	12.5
1953	83.5	43.4	21.7	12.5
1963	84.7	50.2	26.1	13.1
1971	86.6	53.2	25.6	13.4
1981	83.5	51.5	24.9	13.4
Department of Census & Statistic, & Ministry of Plan Implementation, 1986				

Table 2.2. Changes in the Unmarried Population Ratio among Young Adults, Sri Lanka 1946-1981				
Unmarried population as a percentage of total population in the cohort				
Females				
Year	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years
1946	29.4	11.8	6.6	4.3
1953	32.5	12.8	7.5	5.4
1963	41.3	17.1	8.3	4.8
1971	53.2	24.6	10.9	5.8
1981	55.3	30.4	15.8	8.9
Department of Census & Statistic, & Ministry of Plan Implementation, 1986				

The set of data presented in Table 2.1 and 2.2, looked at from such a perspective, indicates that a fairly large proportion of the Sri Lankan population remains unmarried well past the 'mid-twenties', and that (from about the 1960s), among the males, the unmarried ratio has hovered around 50 per cent of the age cohort

of 25-29 years, and almost a quarter even of the age cohort of 30-34 years. It thus seems that the genuine youth bulge in Sri Lanka, perceived, not in terms of arbitrary age thresholds of 15 and 24 or 29 years, but as a phenomenon of genuine relevance to the understanding of social unrest, could well be as high as 40 per cent of the total 'over 15' population of the country.

An understanding of the nature of psychological pressures and torments to which the 'youth', so perceived, are subject to is implicit in the following sketch extracted from a recent study on the theme of 'youth and social change'. It encapsulates in a fairly comprehensive manner the mutually incongruent behavioural and cultural paradigms to which the youth in countries like Sri Lanka are exposed.

Youth around the world are affected by a global culture diffused principally through the media. This youth culture tends to highlight sexual gratification, individual freedom including sexual freedom and freedom of choice as regards one's friends and love partners, social mobility, achievement orientation and the like. On the other hand, cultural perceptions such as the value of virginity until marriage continue to influence youth through family, peer networks, nationalist awakening and the related resurgence of selected 'traditional' values. As an intimate aspect of youth social life, sexuality is one arena where contradictory global and local influences on youth give rise to tension at intra-personal and inter-personal levels.¹¹

Marginalisation of Sri Lankan Youth

The link between the phenomenon of the youth bulge and the political convulsions witnessed in Sri Lanka during the past few decades should be contextualised in the economic conditions of

¹¹ K. Tudor Silva, C. Sivayoganathan and Judy Lewis, "Love, Sex and Peer Activity in a Sample of Youth in Sri Lanka", in S.T. Hettige and M. Meyer, eds., *Globalisation, Social Change and Youth*, Centre for Anthropological and Sociological Studies, University of Colombo, 1998, pp. 24-43. This volume is probably the only work of research that attempts to identify links between the problems of youth and political conflict in Sri Lanka and is thus an exception to the observation made at the outset of the present study.

the 1960s and 1970s. To recapitulate the relevant facts, at the termination of colonial rule in 1948, Sri Lanka's economy was characterised by dependent external relations, low levels of per capita production and consumption, relatively low urban development, and a firm Government commitment to the provision of basic-needs services in education, health care and food supply. The country's preoccupation with social welfare alongside rapid population growth resulted in the persistence of low rates of real growth which, according to official estimates, averaged 1.5 per cent per annum from 1950 to 1978.¹² It also meant the excessive Government control of the economy. The slow growth resulted in a low rate of employment generation, one which lagged far behind the expansion of the labour force, the rate of which, in turn, was constantly buttressed by the demographic effects of the advances made through social welfare. Moreover, there emerged wide contrasts in the disbursement of the benefits of development and social welfare, with the peasantry in the more remote areas of the country (Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim), especially those having no personal links with the political parties holding the reins of office, being discriminated against and thus lagging behind the favoured segments of the population.

From the viewpoint of the country's youth, these problems were being exacerbated by several other considerations, one of which was the increasing mismatch between education and manpower needs of the economy. By about the end of the first decades after independence, the educational system that had been shaped to cater to the requirements of an earlier era, but that had remained unchanged, was becoming intrinsically wasteful due to the economic redundancy of an increasing proportion of its products. Much of the educational effort was also of the type that generated rising expectations and intensified resentments when the expectations remain unfulfilled. Thus, from about the second decade after independence, it became more and more difficult for

¹² The authenticity of the official estimates have been challenged by Bhalla and Glewwe according to whom, over almost the entirety of this period, the economy of Sri Lanka did not experience any real growth. See, S.S. Bhalla and P. Glewwe, "Growth and Equity in Developing Countries: A Re-Interpretation of the Sri Lankan Experience", World Bank Economic Review, Vol. No. 1, 1986.

the educated to be absorbed into productive employment commensurate with their educational status.

Table 3. Level of Education and Rate of Unemployment, 1978/79	
Educational Status	per cent unemployed in the labour force of each educational category
No schooling, illiterate	3.0
No schooling, literate	1.3
Primary Level	4.9
Junior Secondary Level	19.8
Passed GCE Ordinary Level	28.5
Passed GCE Advanced Level	34.8
Tertiary Level qualifications	7.6
Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 1981	

To the less privileged in society, regardless of their variations in ethnicity, at this critical phase in which they were beginning to gain access in larger numbers than ever before to opportunities for formal education at the higher levels – the replacement of English with *Sinhala* and *Thamil* as media of instruction in the more popular courses of study at tertiary level in the 1960s was a crucial factor in this expansion of opportunities – the scope for upward social mobility through education alone became virtually non-existent. The glut of the ‘educated’ in the job market was reflected not only in the persisting positive covariance between level of education and rate of unemployment (Table 3), but also in a steady devaluation of non-professional educational qualifications at the higher levels. For instance, the ratio of average earnings of those employed with education up to the GCE-Ordinary Level, and the employed university graduates (other than those in medicine and engineering), which was 1:3.6 in 1963, declined to 1:2.4 in 1973, and to 1:1.3 in 1981/82.¹³

¹³ These estimates have been derived from the related data extracted from *Survey of Ceylon's Consumer Finances, 1963*, Central Bank of Ceylon/Sri Lanka,

Certain other features of the education system, prominent during the past few decades, have contributed to the non-fulfilment of youth aspirations of upward social mobility through education. The first of these was the presence of obstacles in school education that prevented the large majority of pupils from proceeding to the higher levels. The 'student pyramid' narrowed so sharply, that the number reaching the tertiary level in a given year was equivalent to only about one percent of the number at the higher secondary levels at school. There were, in addition, the excessive delays in a student's passage through the educational system due to time-gaps between termination of study at one level and the commencement at the next level, the organisational inefficiency of the system, and the high failure rate at public examinations. These, in turn, resulted in an excessively large drop-out rate from the school system into the already saturated employment market.

A Normative Model of Youth Responses

In the responses of the Sri Lankan youth to the foregoing conditions, there has obviously been much diversity, the nature of which could be modelled as follows. Some in this segment of society (invariably those from the more affluent households) have been unaffected by the problems, and hence showed *no discernible response*. Following the 'liberalisation' of the economy in the late 1970s and the subsequent expansion of the 'private sector', this unaffected segment expanded in size, but yet remained largely confined to the middle and upper strata of urban society. They had the means to adopt the 'westernised' lifestyles purveyed through the media. Their easier access to the types of education and training that have a demand in the job market, their communication skills in English, and, of course, their parental affluence and influence (political party affiliations, peer links in the case of those in elite professions, and the alumnae networks of the prestigious urban

Colombo, 1964; *Survey of Sri Lanka's Consumer Finances, 1973 - Parts I & II*, 1974; *Report on Consumer Finances and Socio-Economic Survey, 1981-82 - Part I*, 1983; and *Report on Consumer Finances and Socio-Economic Survey, 1981-82 - Part II*, 1984.

schools had a lot to do with such influence), set them apart from the other segments of youth.

One of the remarkable features of the response of Sri Lankan youth to the gloomy conditions referred to above, is that the overwhelming majority of youth continued to reconcile themselves to the increasing hardships, and to remain in *passive acceptance* of the prevailing state of things in the hope that, with personal effort (and luck), their own problems could somehow be overcome. This is why hundreds of thousands among them persisted with their attendance at private 'tutories' in the hope of acquiring marketable skills, which the school system did not impart, and/or to enhance their competitive strength at public examinations and gain entry even to the virtually valueless 'arts' course of study in the university system. An overlapping set of reactions, which is also essentially 'conformist', could be discerned in the form of those who opt to agitate collectively (but part-time and as pastime) from within the system, against a narrow range of systemic issues – more jobs for school-leavers and graduates, higher payments through bursaries for university students, less exacting examination procedures, less rigorous enforcement of discipline, etc. They join street demonstrations and political rallies in support of causes that range from ethnic harmony or *Pongu Tamil* to protection of human rights, prevention of 'unethical' religious conversion, or saving the environment from coal-power plants. The youth that could be placed in this category are also mobilised by parties in mainstream politics to serve as their 'boys' in the less dignified fringe tasks, such as those of leg-men and storm-troopers.

Finally, there is the set of youth responses which, according to psychologists, signifies *frustration-aggression*'. This is of special importance from the viewpoint of political unrest. *Renunciation*, one such response represented, typically, by the 'hippy culture', with which the world became familiar in the 1960s was, for obvious reasons, not evident among the diverse youth responses in Sri Lanka where, however, frustration-aggression did find expression in a variety of other forms, both of individual and collective behaviour. Among these, there is, first, collective *acts of depravity*, one of the best known examples of which is 'ragging' (*aka* 'hazing') – quite often an orgy of simulated sexual subjugation conducted in the guise of initiation rites administered to new entrants at many institutions

(not only the universities, as popularly believed) that accommodate large numbers of youth. *Drug addiction* could be considered yet another response in this category. A study conducted in 1993 of a random sample of 371 heroin users indicated, for example, that 49 per cent of the addicted were in the 15-29 years age group, with 30 per cent between ages of 25 and 29. In the most blatantly self-destructive form of frustration-aggression – *suicide* – in which, Sri Lanka is said to outrank all other countries, there is a preponderance of youth.¹⁴ In addition, there is the fairly extensive and ominously expanding youth participation in *crime*. According to a recent (2005) Police report, in Colombo city alone, there are 52 underworld gangs (some, with membership of several hundreds of young men of all ethnic groups) that engage in almost the entire range of organised vice and crime. And then, there is participation in *armed insurrection*, the ‘frustration-aggression’ response which is of greater direct concern than the others referred to above, from the perspectives of the present study

Youth Participation in Armed Insurrection

Implicit in the model presented above is the idea that those likely to turn towards armed insurrection in response to socio-economic stresses and strains would constitute only a segment of the social class of ‘youth’, and that, even in the ethos of widespread youth discontent that has prevailed in Sri Lanka over the recent decades, the proportion of ‘youth’ attracted to the larger movements of insurrectionary violence would have varied widely from time to time and from one part of the country to another, depending not only on the intensity of their hardships, but also on the relative attraction of other responses (referred to above) and the availability of ‘stress release’ mechanisms. Emigration has probably served as one of the most important among such mechanisms in the case of Jaffna, as evidenced by the fact that there has been a preponderance of the youth from the northern peninsula, both in the estimated 300,000

¹⁴ According to a study by Robert C Oberst cited in S.T. Hettige, “Youth Unrest in Sri Lanka: A Sociological Perspective”, in Hettige and Meyer, *op. cit.*, the suicide rate among males of 20-24 years and 25-29 years was, respective, 115.4 and 103.4 per 100,000 of population. These values were substantially higher than the corresponding values of all other 5-year age cohorts - male and female.

migrants from Sri Lanka to foreign destinations since the early 1980s, as well as in the increase of the Tamil population in Colombo District by 82,385 between the census years 1981 and 2001.

There is a thin scatter of evidence which suggest that, in the Sinhalese segment of the population, active participants in each of the insurgencies of 1971 and 1986-89 never exceeded 20,000 young men and women.¹⁵ In the LTTE-led secessionist insurrection, as Narayan Swamy has indicated,¹⁶ the fighting cadres, numbering about 3,000 at the time of arrival of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force in 1987, would have increased to about 10,000 at the time of their retreat from Jaffna peninsula at the end of 1995; and the scarcity of recruits has all along been one of the most formidable problems faced by the Tiger leadership.

The inculcation of the notion of liberation through armed struggle in the minds of the youth, who respond aggressively to their frustrations, appears to result in their enrolment in organisations that engaged in attacks against not only those identified for them as their oppressors – the existing system of Government, or the armed forces of the Government, or people belonging to one or another ethnic group – but also against any person (including those of their own kind and erstwhile mentors) who stands in their way.¹⁷ Recruitment, in most instances, involves an unchangeable lifetime commitment, the finality of which (in the case of the LTTE) is symbolised by the well known cyanide capsule awarded at admission to membership. The recruits are aware that any deviation from the course charted by their leadership is punishable by death. Some recruits are admitted to an elite corps of suicide killers and are called upon to engage in missions from which they cannot return alive. All are trained in the art of guerrilla warfare and terrorism, and are mentally conditioned to be totally ruthless and devoid of ordinary human emotions in

¹⁵ According to my estimates, the death-toll of suspected insurgents in the course of the JVP insurrection of the late-1980s was about 15,000. Since the Government offensive, especially in the final stages of the insurrection, was based on a policy of complete eradication, there is reason to assume that the total number of youth that participated in violence at the behest of the JVP is unlikely to have exceeded the estimated death-toll by a wide margin. G.H. Peiris, *Sri Lanka: Challenges of the New Millennium*, Kandy: Kandy Books, 2006, p. 372.

¹⁶ Narayan Swamy op. cit., p. 343.

¹⁷ Among the Tamils, there have hitherto been nine militant outfits (including the LTTE) with the term 'liberation' in their names; Muslims have had two; and the Sinhalese, two (including the JVP).

carrying out their assigned tasks, which could involve assassination, massacre of unarmed people, mutilation of women and children in close personal encounters, and inflicting torture on those whom they capture. Their own causality rates are high, and, if captured in combat, they face prospects of extreme suffering. The promised 'liberation' invariably remains a hazy vision. Those who opt for the insurrectionary response of 'frustration-aggression', it could be assumed, know all this.

From which segments of society do these movements attract recruits? The related *quantifiable* information is fragmentary, largely confined to aspects of the two JVP-led insurrections, and could be used only for purposes of reasoned speculation. The set of data presented in Table 4 above, furnishes a fairly precise answer to this question in respect of the insurrection of 1971, leaving hardly any doubt that the JVP of that time mobilised overwhelmingly from the age group of 15 to 34 years, unemployed or in work that generates low and irregular earnings, whose educational levels provided hardly any prospects for improvement of income and elevation of social status.

The data on the homicides reported to have been committed by those acting under the orders of the JVP leadership during the insurrection of 1986-89 (Table 5) could be considered useful for the clues these provide on spatial variations in the intensity of insurrectionary violence in the Sinhalese-majority areas during that period.¹⁸ On the assumption that the reports are reasonably accurate, what could be seen as the most pronounced feature borne out by this data is that the southern Districts of Matara and Hambantota (more specifically, the 'deep south' which extends into the interior of Galle District as well), and the Districts of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Ampara and Monaragala (covering much of the Dry Zone interior) stand apart as venues of extraordinarily high incidence of violence. In contrast, the intensity of violence along the urbanised coastal lowlands of the west appears to have been remarkably low. (Figure 1 is intended to portray the configuration of the Districts referred to in this section.)

¹⁸ In the context of the intense political turbulences of that time, there is obviously an element of doubt about the accuracy of the records from which the data used in the compilation of this tabulation have been extracted.

Table 4 – Socio-Economic Profile of Participants in the JVP-led Insurrection of 1971

AGE (percent in each category)				
0-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45 <
0.4	71.9	22.1	3.7	1.9
EDUCATIONAL STATUS (percent in each category)				
No schooling	Grades 1 - 4	Grades 5 - 8	Grades 9 - 12	Tertiary
2.5	17.1	42.3	36.3	1.8
ETHNICITY (percent in each category)				
Sinhalese	Tamil	Moors & Malays	Others	Not recorded
97.6	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.7
OCCUPATION (percent in each category)				
Student	Unemployed/self-employed (low	In low income salaried jobs	In middle-income salaried jobs	Others including 'unverified'
12.5	59.2	8.4	12.1	7.8

These estimates are based on information extracted from 10,192 detainees in government custody as suspects of participating in the insurrection of 1971 and have been extracted from Gananath Obeyesekere (1974) 'Some Comments on the Social Background of April 1971 Insurgency in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 33 (3): pp. 367-84.

Table 5. Homicides attributed to the JVP During the Insurrection of 1986-89		
<i>Region & District</i>	Rate per 100,000 of the population in 1981	Rate per 100,000 of the Sinhalese population in 1981
<i>Lowlands of the Southwest</i>		
Colombo	62	50
Gampaha	83	90
Ratnapura	62	75
Kegalle	74	87
<i>Southern Lowlands</i>		
Galle	98	104
Matara	182	193
Hambantota	230	236
<i>Western Lowlands</i>		
Kurunegala	99	106
Puttalam	84	101
<i>Dry Zone Lowlands</i>		
Anuradhapura	205	224
Polonnaruwa	151	166
Ampara	108	288
Monaragala	156	168
<i>Central Highlands</i>		
Kandy	68	91
Nuwara Eliya	26	72
Badulla	31	53
<p>These estimates have been derived from published data from the census enumerations of 1981, and data extracted from unpublished records maintained at the Police Headquarters in Colombo.</p>		

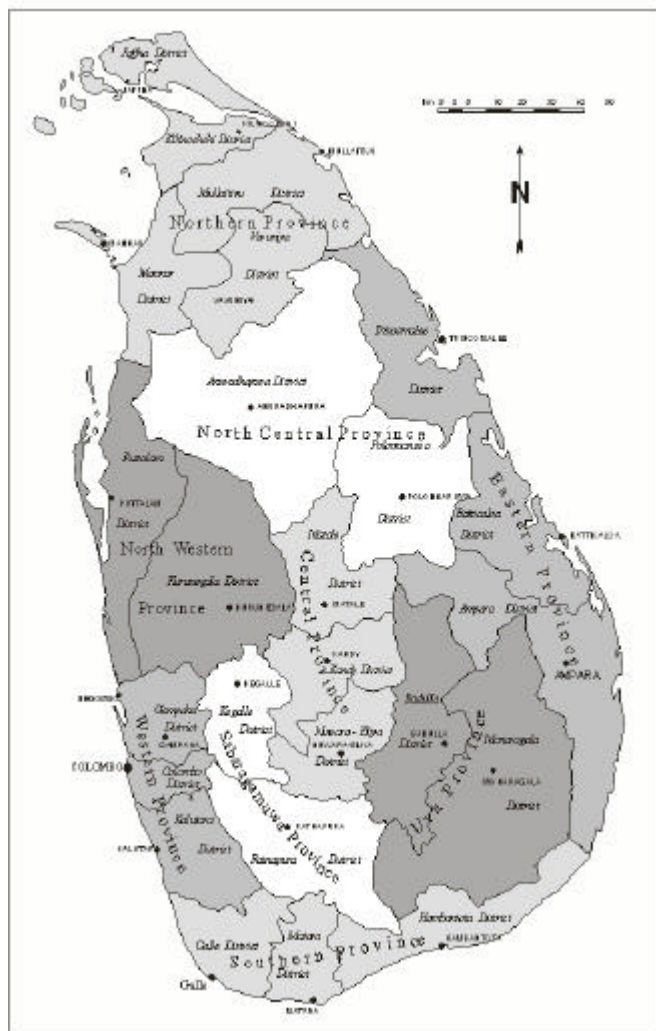


Figure 1 - Sri Lanka: Province and District Boundaries

Comparisons have sometimes been drawn between the socio-economic conditions of the ‘deep south’ and those of the politically volatile Jaffna peninsula, which, until the eviction of the LTTE from

the area in December 1995, was the principal venue of the secessionist insurrection. Both areas have, for long, been characterised by a very high population density and a relatively poor physical resource base. There has, all along, been a tendency – one that dates back to the 19th Century in the case of Jaffna – for people from these two areas to venture out into other parts of the country in search of tertiary sector employment. Even in the aftermath of independence, earnings from external sources figured prominently in the economic wellbeing of the ‘deep south’, as it was for the Tamils of the northern peninsula. A fairly well developed network of secondary education (a legacy of colonial rule in the case of Jaffna, and a feature of more recent origin – of the 1930s and 1940s – in the ‘deep south’), along with a tradition of initiative and enterprise among the people, facilitated this greater social and occupational mobility. In the early aftermath of independence, it was mainly the more successful products of school education in these two areas that made serious inroads into the Colombo hegemony in the higher rungs of administration and the professions. Yet, in these two areas, for reasons that could be linked to history, ethno-nationalist sentiments have also been more pronounced. The Buddhist resurgence of the late-19th and early 20th Centuries, led by Anagarika Dharmapala, had a more profound impact on the attitudes and outlook of the Sinhalese of the ‘deep south’ than those in other parts of the island, as did the Hindu revivalism of that time, led by Arumuga Navalar, on the Tamils of the ‘far north’, than their compatriots elsewhere. The early development of a vibrant *swabhasha* (community specific language) press (in *Sinhala* in the south and in *Tamil* in the north) also constituted vital ingredients of this ethno-nationalist acculturation.¹⁹

A recently published sociological study by Meyer contains references to other similarities in the socio-economic circumstances of the youth in the Jaffna peninsula of the north and Hambantota District of the south in recent times, despite the continuing impact of the secessionist war on the former area.

¹⁹ On the early stages of development of the indigenous press in Sri Lanka see, K.N.O. Dharmadasa, “Formative Stages of Sinhala Journalism”; and P. Muthulingam, “Evolution of the Tamil Press of Sri Lanka”; both articles in G.H. Peiris, ed, *Studies on the Press in Sri Lanka and South Asia*, Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1997, pp. 149-65 and 181-92.

Meyer states, for example, that “(t)he overall picture arising from the interviews with youth in Jaffna as well as Hambantota revealed that the youth are getting increasingly marginalized by society, one of the main causes being the lack of spaces for constructive engagement within the community, such as employment or social service oriented activities.”²⁰

If the impact of the adverse economic trends of the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s outlined earlier, especially the steady curtailment of opportunities for economic advancement through education for the rural youth, were to be placed against the background of the commonalities of the two regions identified above, it would be possible to find an explanation for the fact that these two areas served as the main breeding grounds of militant politics almost throughout the past few decades.²¹

The economic setting of the second area identified earlier as one of high incidence of violence during the JVP insurrection of 1986-89 – the Dry Zone interior – is dominated by agglomerations of planned irrigation-based settlement schemes, the economic activities of which are dominated by paddy production. It has been repeatedly shown through many in-depth studies²² that these schemes are characterised by low overall standards of living, albeit with wide intra-community diversities of wealth and income, and that many of them suffer from uncertainties of water supply for agriculture; and difficulties of access to markets and basic needs services such as those in education, health care, transport and domestic lighting. Even under the best of conditions, the farmers attaining the highest levels of yield through ‘green revolution’ technology earn *per capita* net incomes that work out to less than a dollar a day. In the schemes located away from the main urban centres of the Dry

²⁰ See M. Mayer, “Violent Youth Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Comparative Results from Jaffna and Hambantota”, in Hettige and Meyer, op. cit. pp. 208-48.

²¹ While highlighting these similarities, however, it is necessary to take note of two important differences between the ‘deep south’ and the ‘far north’ – one, the extent of Christian penetration, hardly evident in the former, but very prominent in the latter; and the other, the dominance of the Vellala caste in the latter, and the near-equal status of Goigama, Karawa and Durawa castes in the former.

²² Peiris, *Sri Lanka: Challenges of the New Millennium*, pp. 238-41 contains a review of these studies.

Zone, the settlement economy offers little scope for tertiary employment and occupational mobility; and, since the settlers remain confined to an unchanging agrarian resource base (the land allotment received at inception of the settlement), the increase of their numbers over time inevitably results, not merely in the lowering of their household incomes, but also in the progressive economic destitution of their youth. With the soaring costs of agricultural inputs even the basic necessities of life could often be scarce. In such economic circumstances, the lot of the youth is one of deprivation and despair. The education to which they have access seldom has economic value. Years of book-learning at school, meagre incomes which paddy cultivation generates, and the lowly social status of their parents, make them disinclined to remain in farming. They thus become economic misfits in their community. Their frustrations are constantly buttressed by information flows on lifestyles which they could never hope to emulate. It is not merely the unattainable levels projected through consumer culture and the pleasure ethic purveyed by the media, but the constant inculcation of the idea that they are a worthless, inferior, breed. It is in these circumstances that the message of 'liberation', the camaraderie of fellow liberators, and the power of the AK 47 and the hand grenade, collectively provide the breakthrough to dignified and purposeful existence.

On the basis of geographical similarities it could be surmised that the problems encountered by youth in the agrarian settings sketched out above were replicated in many of the Tamil- and Muslim- majority areas of the north-east, outside Jaffna peninsula, notably the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province and the Districts of Vavuniya, Mannar and Mullaitivu in the Northern Province. From about the late-1960s, as economic conditions in the country as a whole worsened, deprivations suffered by the youth of these areas are likely to have been more severe than those faced by their counterparts elsewhere, for the reason that they were firmly entrapped in their settings, with hardly any opportunities for spatial mobility. It is not surprising, therefore, that the more densely populated localities in this part of the country – especially Batticaloa District – served as one of the largest sources of recruits into the Tiger fold, surpassing all other

areas in that respect after the withdrawal of the LTTE from Jaffna peninsula.

According to the data on the JVP-led insurrection of 1986-89 (Table 5) the lowest incidence of violence (in proportion to population) occurred in the coastal lowlands of the west which roughly corresponds to the area sometimes referred to as the 'Christian belt'. The relevance of this, from the perspectives of the present study, is that, in this part of the country, it is possible to identify several factors which mitigate 'frustration-aggression' responses among the youth. Those living here have higher incomes, and more opportunities to acquire skills that command a premium in the job market, especially in the private sector, which expanded rapidly over the past three decades. More generally, they have received the direct benefits of 'liberalisation' – more jobs, enhanced incomes, better socio-economic infrastructure, and more facilities for entertainment and leisure – to a substantially greater degree than those living in other areas of the country. Impressionistically, one could also suggest that the social impact of the 'Church' is also a formidable check against alienation of the youth. The smaller Christian denominations, in particular, confined as they are largely to the urban middle-class, constitute close-knit communities within which a young person finds a social niche among peer groups of shared interests and inclinations.

Concluding Comments

The thematic prominence accorded to the phenomenon of youth unrest in the present study, as anticipated at its outset, has facilitated the recognition of several considerations that could be deemed vitally salient to the search for solutions to the various forms of political unrest in the country, of which the secessionist insurrection has been by far the most destructive in impact. The theoretical postulate of the youth bulge in its application to Sri Lanka, despite the limitations inherent to its simple demographic rendition, is a useful analytical tool, especially from the viewpoint of both forecasting political conflict as well as prioritising the options available for the resolution of such conflict. That measures specifically focused on the direct alleviation of the problems encountered by the youth, especially those that address the non-

fulfilment of economic aspirations, should receive utmost priority in policy formulation is implicit in our analysis. The acceleration of employment creation and the orientation of formal education and training towards changing economic needs are, of course, the more obvious (and the most often stated) long-term solutions which hardly need reiteration here. What should be highlighted as an urgent requirement, however, is Government intervention in the curtailment of certain features of Sri Lankan society, which have assumed alarming proportions since the economic policy reforms of the late 1970s, to aggravate the problems of the youth, and that cause widespread resentment among the young men and women of the country, a part of which, as shown earlier, is diverted into violent conflict.

The foremost among these is represented by the extravagant and wasteful lifestyles of a small segment of society, the most pernicious feature of which is that it is the political elite that is seen by the ordinary folk as its trend-setters. The leadership of mainstream politics, despite being constantly in the public eye, has become the most conspicuous consumer of acutely scarce resources belonging to the society as a whole. It is not surprising, therefore, that the absurdly bloated executive branch of Government (which, in terms of size in relation to the population, probably surpasses that of any other country in the world), the mammoth national Parliament, and several tiers of sub-national institutions of Government formed of 'regional' or 'local' political leaders, all of whom extract from the system material benefits that are denied to the large majority of people whom they are said to represent and serve, are seen as parasites. This image, needless to stress, is magnified by rampant corruption in public affairs, and the public awareness of links that exist between politicians, gangland leaders and the Police. Unless and until these conditions are changed, it seems unlikely that the other measures intended to alleviate the problems of the youth will have a tangible impact.

Creating new layers of institutional networks of Government and, thus, proliferating sub-national political elites in the guise of power-sharing, is likely to aggravate rather than alleviate the problems that generate youth discontent among all ethnic groups of the country. In the national Legislature, there is, on the average, one representative for a population of 88,000. More than one-hundred

among these representatives also hold posts in the executive branch of the Central Government. There are, in addition, seven Provincial Councils (constitutional provision exists for nine) each of which has an average of about 30 elected members, a Chief Minister and a Board of Ministers; 18 Municipal Councils; 42 Urban Councils; and 270 *Pradeshiya Sabha* (rural, local government institutions); all of which are controlled by several thousands of elected representatives' of the people who, needless to say, enjoy various benefits for the 'selfless sacrifices' they make. Given the comparative smallness of the country (66,000 square kilometres, and 19 million people), and in the context of the fact that many of the potentially volatile areas have populations of mixed ethnicity, it is inconceivable that devolution of the powers of Government will facilitate either greater inter-ethnic power-sharing or the greater participation of youth in the affairs of Government than at present. One also recapitulates here the observations made by Rothchild and Roeder in their authoritative study of intra-state conflict in multi-ethnic societies according to which:

(I)n ethnically divided societies after intense conflicts they (i.e. power-sharing institutions) typically have a set of unintended but perverse consequences. They empower ethnic elites from previously warring groups, create incentives for these elites to press radical demands once peace is in place, and lower the costs for these elites to escalate conflict in ways that threaten democracy and peace. These dangers can be avoided when power-sharing institutions operate under very special conditions such as a political culture of accommodation, economic prosperity and equality, demographic stability, strong governmental institutions, stable hierarchical relations within ethnic communities, and a supportive international environment. Yet those conditions are unlikely to be present or difficult to sustain after severe conflicts such as civil wars.²³

²³ Donald Rothchild and Philip G. Roeder, "Power Sharing as an Impediment to Peace and Democracy," in Donald Rothchild and Philip G. Roeder, eds., *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars*, Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 29.

Another compelling policy imperative is the need to reduce regional and urban-rural contrasts in the socio-economic and cultural environment of the youth. The novelty in the related specificities that emerge from our focus on youth discontent is that, in the conversion of this idea into concrete programmes of action, there is a compelling need to focus on the youth in certain parts of the country, mainly for the purpose of correcting prevailing imbalances. Though the war-ravaged areas of the northeast demand more immediate attention than any other, among them, in the context of the demographic changes witnessed during the past two decades – especially, the large-scale exodus of youth from Jaffna peninsula referred to above – the requirements of the densely populated areas of the eastern lowlands need to be considered more urgent than those of the far-north. At the same time, the prioritisation of the ‘youth perspective’ would also entail attention being devoted to the Central Highlands, where both the plantation workforce as well as the Kandyan peasantry will continue to be distinguished, in the foreseeable future, by the risks associated with the destabilising impact of the youth bulge. The economic and cultural discontent in the agrarian settlement environs of the Dry Zone is also likely to aggravate rapidly in the period ahead, creating potentially volatile political conditions needing prompt and effective remedial action. The main ethnic groups of Sri Lanka are represented in the peasantry of this part of the country, which accounts for roughly 15 per cent of the total population. Except in the case of those inhabiting the few localities favoured with reliable irrigation facilities and easier access to the main markets, their youth suffer from the same dire hardships and the same sense of despair.