

Buddhist nationalism behind Sri Lanka's violent surge

Monday 18 June 2007, by [RIDGE Mian](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2007).

The island nation's government is receiving new support from an unusual political group.

Colombo, Sri Lanka - As the war that has ravaged Sri Lanka for 25 years once again degenerates into widespread violence, the government is receiving new support from an unusual political group.

They are orange-robed, barefoot Buddhist monks. But instead of extolling peace and harmony, they are employing the uncompromising language of military strength.

"Day by day we are weakening the LTTE militarily," says the Venerable Athuraliye Rathana, a monk in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, as he spoke of the government's campaign to destroy the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, known as the Tamil Tigers. "Talk can come later."

Sri Lanka's hard-line monks are at the frontline of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, which views Tamils as outsiders. In January, they joined the government's ruling coalition with their party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, or National Heritage Party - pushing its narrow one-seat majority up to nine.

Since 1983, the Tigers have been fighting for a crescent-shaped homeland, or "Eelam," in the north and east of Sri Lanka for the Tamil minority, which is Hindu and Christian. Tamils have suffered decades of discrimination by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority.

Many observers say that a resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism has played its part in several recent human rights violations.

The monks are arguing vociferously against any self-determination for the Tamils in the north,

including even the measure of autonomy that most observers believe is necessary for peace.

Nine seats is not many in a 225-seat parliament, but the monks wield greater power because they share their nationalist ideology with many other members of the government, says Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, who runs the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a think tank in Colombo.

Despite enjoying a strong majority on the island nation, the presence of 50 million Tamils across the Palk Strait in southern India can rattle Sinhalese Buddhists. Buddhist nationalists are able to tap into deep fears that any territorial concessions to the Tamils would lead to eventual Indian subjugation.

"I feel so sorry for the Tamils who are suffering," says a Sinhalese taxi driver in Colombo. "But giving them power in the north would not be good. They might try to extend their power."

The monks have used their new clout to urge the president, Mahinda Rajapakse, to honor the vow with which he came to power in late 2005: to destroy the Tigers.

The Tamil desire for a homeland is just an excuse for violence, says Mr. Rathana. "Sri Lanka was totally a Sinhalese kingdom and most people accept that."

Western governments have long been appalled by the tactics of the Tamil Tigers, who terrorize both Sinhalese and Tamils with their bombings and the forcible recruitment of child soldiers.

Now, several governments have expressed horror over independent reports of government collusion in abductions and murders of civilian Tamils, particularly in the north and east.

Earlier this month, the government rounded up more than 350 Tamils in Colombo and transported them by bus to the north and east - a move human rights groups described as a "pogrom." Sri Lanka's Supreme Court intervened to halt the evictions soon after they began.

This was a "minor example," says Jehan Perera,

executive director of the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, a group working for reconciliation. Throughout Sri Lanka, Tamils felt insecure and vulnerable, says Mr. Perera, who is Sinhalese.

On the Jaffna Peninsula alone, the only part of the Tamil-majority north controlled by government forces, more than 300 civilians have been murdered in the past 18 months; many of them, it is suspected, by a paramilitary force with close ties to the military intelligence agency.

Both Sinhalese and Tamils trace their presence in Sri Lanka back centuries. Until relatively recently, theirs was a harmonious coexistence.

But in the 19th century, many Buddhist Sinhalese felt that the British, who then ruled Ceylon, gave the Tamils preferential treatment. At independence in 1948, a disproportionate number of civil servants were Tamils.

In 1956, the Sinhalese made swift and brutal amends. Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike, an ardent Buddhist nationalist, launched a successful campaign to make Sinhalese the official language.

He was heavily backed by the island's monks in a move that excluded many Tamils from educational opportunities and prestigious jobs. In 1970, university admission rules were changed to favor the Sinhalese.

P.S.

* From The Christian Science Monitor, June 18, 2007 edition. Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire | June 17-18, 2007 | Dispatch No. 2420 - Year 9.

* Mian Ridge is Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor.