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Who ruined Sri Lanka?

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It's hard to know who ruined Sri Lanka, because are so many plausible candidates.

You could blame the Buddhist extremists of the majority Sinhalese population who led the first pogroms against the Tamil minority in 1958, or the Marxist insurrection that broke out in 1971 (30,000 dead) and resumed in 1987-89 (60,000 dead), or the government-backed attacks on Tamils that started the 26-year-long civil war in 1983 (100,000 dead).

Or you could choose the massacres of Tamils that ended that war in 2009 and brought the Rajapaksa clan to power, or the deluded Sinhalese Buddhists who went on voting for the Rajapaksas even as they looted the economy, or the 2019-2022 economic collapse that made even food and medicines unavailable to much of the population.

That ended with a non-violent revolution that ousted the Rajapaksas, and then a brief interval in 2022-2024 when a more or less non-political government negotiated loans from the International Monetary Fund and made deals with its biggest creditors. But the outbreak of tranquility may not last.

The austerity weighed heavily on an impoverished and disillusioned population, and in last Sunday's election they voted a Marxist party into power. It's the same Marxist party that launched the terrorist insurgencies of 1971 and 1987, although the current leader and new president of Sri Lanka, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, swears it will be different this time.

Dissanayake's party, Janatha Vimukthi Peremuna (People's Liberation Front), is what you would expect from a long-established Marxist-Leninist party that has outgrown its early enthusiasm for armed revolution but still holds fast to its core ?socialist' values.

Nobody knows the future, but here's how this is likely to play out over the next couple of years. Dissanayake will not get better terms on Sri Lanka's debt while he is simultaneously cutting taxes and raising welfare payments. He will probably have to start printing money again (inflation is currently under control) to cover even half his promises.

The only way he won power this time is because a despairing and disillusioned electorate was willing to bet on any party that had not already failed. (The JVP got only 3 per cent of the votes in the previous election in 2019, but 46 per cent this time.) If Dissanayake cannot keep his promises, which is all too likely, the anger and the violence may return.

But why is Sri Lanka's post-colonial history so angry and violent? None of the five major successor states to the British empire in South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka) has an entirely peaceful past, but none compares with Sri Lanka for sustained, large-scale violence across five decades.

It's fashionable to blame the British empire, because British colonial administrators preferred to hire and promote members of the Tamil-speaking Hindu minority (15 per cent of the population) rather than members of the fiercely nationalistic Sinhala-speaking Buddhist majority. This led to resentment in the majority, which led to anti-Tamil violence, etc., etc.

But this is really an inadequate explanation for the mass murders of Tamils by Sinhalese mobs, police or soldiers are a recurrent feature of post-independence Sri Lankan history.

The likelier answer is that Buddhist communities in south and southeast Asia feel besieged even when they are in the majority, and lash out against communities of other faiths that really pose no threat to them.

It's not just Sri Lanka. Consider the brutal behaviour of Burma's Buddhist majority towards the country's 4 per cent Muslim minority, the Rohingyas. Most of the survivors now live in refugee camps in Bangladesh.

When some pattern of behaviour seems inexplicable, the real reason is often history. Buddhism rose to dominate India and most of south and southeast Asia in 500 BC-500 AD, but was then reduced to a tiny minority of believers in the next thousand years by a revival of the old religion of Hinduism and the arrival of the new religion of Islam.

Such a huge defeat can leave lasting scars. It may have left a conviction deeper than words in the few remaining Buddhist countries that they are forever at risk of being somehow replaced by the ?enemy' in their midst. Get the minority before they become the majority.

I don't like this hypothesis, but I suspect it may be true.