The lessons to be drawn from Sri Lanka's violence (1993, May 10). *The Globe and Mail.*

CONFLICT / *Tamils and Sinhalese had lived together on the island for 2,000-odd years. What went wrong?*

The lessons to be drawn from Sri Lanka's violence

From an editorial in this week's Economist magazine:

IT is of no great consequence to the rest of the world that a small island off the end of the Indian subcontinent should have sunk over the past couple of decades into a condition of violence so endemic that the murder of the president and a leading opposition politician within eight days can be regarded by the locals with something like equanimity. Yet the story of Sri Lanka's disaster is worth paying attention to. New countries in the former Soviet empire, now making mistakes similar to those Sri Lanka made after decolonization, should note where they can lead.

Sri Lanka had a lot going for it: democracy going back to 1931 and a literacy rate which, at 88 per cent, is the highest of the 43 countries the World Bank classifies as "low-income." Sri Lanka's recent governments, which have been busily unravelling state controls, see no reason why it should not be a Singapore.

Yet in the past decade more than 50,000 people have died in the fighting between the security forces, separatist Tamil guerrillas and a now-faded nationalist revolt; and prominent politicians and soldiers are murdered with monotonous regularity. Economic growth, at an annual average of 4 per cent over the past five years, is not bad in the circumstances, though not as spectacular as the South-East Asian growth rates that Sri Lanka aspires to emulate.

The Economist

So was Sri Lanka's disaster drearily inevitable? Probably not. Unlike many countries that pull themselves apart, Sri Lanka was not artificially put together. Tamils and Sinhalese have lived together on the island for 2,000-odd years. Despite the Hinduism of most Tamils and the Buddhism of most Sinhalese, they co-existed for those two millennia without much hostility. Indeed, when the Sinhalese were short of a king in the 18th century, they drafted a Tamil prince to start the dynasty that survived until the British moved in.

What went wrong? Language, mainly. Short-sighted Sinhalese politicians decided, after independence in 1948, to make Sinhalese the only official language. Tamils felt deprived of access to government and of their traditional route to advancement, jobs in the civil service. There followed a series of laws setting up separate schools for Sri Lanka's different language-groups and establishing quotas for Sinhala-speakers in universities.

Many of these measures were later recognized as discriminatory and overturned. But by then it was too late. Angry young Tamils had started their terrorist movements, among them the Tamil Tigers, and so the terrible cycle of destruction and retribution began.

In the former Soviet Union, new nations are indulging in the luxury of nationalism, sometimes tinged with revenge on their former Russian masters. The Estonians require a language test before full civil rights are granted, to the dismay of their Russian-speaking population. The Moldovans have made Moldovan the only official language, putting Russians and Ukrainians at the same disadvantage as Sri Lanka once put its Tamils. The Slovaks are trying to rub out the use of Hungarian in officialdom.

Such measures may be presented as a simple way of making the majority feel in control of its destiny. Sri Lanka's deterioration suggests that, in the long run, everybody may suffer from such exclusivity.

It is easier to fall into a pit than to get out again, and the prospects in Sri Lanka are grim. Ranasinghe Premadasa, the dead president, appeared to have learned that indiscriminate killing of Tamils was not going to make the problem go away. In the past year he had been restraining the army and trying for a political settlement; and there have been signs that Tamil extremists may be prepared to talk about autonomy rather than secession. But the rest of the nationalist-minded government does not appear to favour the federal solution that is the only possible answer.

With Mr. Premadasa's restraining hand removed, the army may again be allowed to do what it wishes. If so, many more Sri Lankans will die before the government learns that more killing does not necessarily lead to less.