

Ethnicity and Social Composition of the Sri Lanka Armed Forces (C. 1949-2005)

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This paper traces the history and evolution of the armed forces in Sri Lanka from the arrival of the British 1976 to the present day. Special attention is paid to issues of ethnicity, class and religion and how these affected recruitment policies, force structure and operational deployment. The question of political influence and loyalties is also considered. The British colonial era is divided in two major periods, i.e. the pre-Volunteer era, 1796-1874, and the Volunteer era, 1881-1949, which essentially analyses the period encompassing the Ceylon Defense Force (CDF).

Post-independence developments are considered in terms of the rise of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and the consequent decline of the British influenced and westernized elements in the ranks of the military. Three major events are analyzed: first, the ascendancy to power of a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist government in 1956 and its impact on the military establishment; second, the 1962 abortive coup and its repercussions; and third, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising in 1971.

The emergence of Tamil separatism and out break of full-scale ethnic confrontation in 1983 onwards has had the most significant consequences for the structure and composition of the armed forces. This ethnic conflict culminated into three phases of internecine combat, known as the Eelam War. In the midst of these crises, another abortive JVP uprising took place for a second time, from 1987- 1989. All these events were instrumental in changing the Sri Lanka armed forces to a more Sinhalese Buddhist institution of more populist stratification and social composition. These overall factors, especially the ethnic conflict are examined and their implications for society and politics in contemporary Sri Lanka considered.

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