Two decades after the burning down of the Jaffna library in Sri Lanka

Vilani Peris
30 May 2001

When the Taliban regime in Afghanistan announced and then carried out the destruction of the massive stone Buddha statues at Bamiyan, the action justifiably provoked outrage around the world. In Sri Lanka, however, the reaction in ruling circles and among the Buddhist hierarchy was mixed with a good deal of rank hypocrisy.

For decades the political establishment in Colombo has promoted the chauvinist view that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist and Sinhalese country in which Tamils and other minorities must take second place. The deliberate stirring up of communal sentiment by successive governments led to the imposition of discriminatory measures against Tamils, anti-Tamil pogroms and in 1983 to the ongoing war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

When the Taliban destroyed the Bamiyan statues, political figures competed with each other to express their disgust at what was taking place. The Buddhist clergy took to the streets in protest and promised to build replicas in Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, known for his Sinhala chauvinist views and links to the clergy, rapidly headed for Pakistan to see what could be done to save the statues.

There was a complete silence in the Colombo media, however, over the parallels in Sri Lanka to the Taliban's cultural vandalism—notably to the destruction of the Jaffna Library in 1981. It is only now, two decades after the library was burnt to the ground, that a replacement building is finally being built in the centre of Jaffna town, 400km north of Colombo. Construction has begun and, according to the engineers in charge, the building should be completed by December.

Nothing, however, can be done about the thousands of priceless Tamil books, manuscripts and ola [dried palm] leaf documents that went up in flames in 1981. Jaffna has been an important Tamil cultural centre for centuries. Some books such as *Yalpanam Vaipavama* —a history of Jaffna—were literally irreplaceable, as the library contained the only existing copy.

The library, which was inaugurated in 1841 and then moved to a more majestic building in 1950, had one of the finest collections in South Asia and was known throughout the world. It was popular among intellectuals, teachers and students—both Sinhalese and Tamil—and was used extensively by ordinary working people. Its destruction, two years before the outbreak of the country's civil war, was an outrage aimed against the cultural heritage of the country's Tamil minority and deliberately calculated to inflame communal sentiment.

A group of racist thugs, instigated by the United National Party (UNP) government, carried out the arson. Eyewitnesses at the time reported that uniformed police accompanied by the gang, brought from the south of the island. They arrived by truck in the dead of the night of May 31, 1981 and set fire to the library buildings.

The fire provoked widespread anger in Jaffna setting off three days of mayhem. Four Tamils were taken from their homes by police and killed. Sinhalese thugs also set fire to the head office of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in Jaffna and then looted about 100 Tamil-owned houses and shops before setting them ablaze as well.

The house belonging to TULF parliamentarian, V. Yogeswaran was destroyed. The offices and press of the Tamil language newspaper, *Ealanadu,* were burnt to the ground. Thugs also defaced or demolished a number of statues of Tamil cultural and religious figures erected at road junctions in the town. The rampage only came to a halt after elections for the District Development Council (DDC) was completed on June 4.

The immediate pretext for the destruction of the library was the killing of two police constables at a TULF election meeting in Jaffna on May 31. No one ever claimed responsibility for the deaths, which took place in a climate of provocation and intimidation whipped up by pro-UNP gangs sent to Jaffna for the election. Police and thugs attacked TULF supporters at the meeting and later that night burnt the library.

The campaign of harassment and thuggery that followed was aimed at intimidating voters and providing a cover for

© World Socialist Web Site

the systematic stuffing of the ballot box to ensure the election of at least some UNP candidates. The UNP established the system of District Development Councils in 1980 in an attempt to placate the demands of Tamils for democratic rights. While the TULF leaders supported the DDC, younger Tamils opposed the charade. As hostility began to grow, the UNP government resorted to more ruthless methods to ensure the outcome of the vote.

Throughout the leadup to the election, the government maintained a media blackout on the crimes being perpetrated in Jaffna by its thugs. On June 3, the presidential office issued a statement insisting that even through Jaffna was under emergency rule, the election would go ahead. In an effort to make the Tamil minority the scapegoat for its own thuggery, prime minister R. Premadasa announced in parliament that a commission would be appointed to probe the deaths of the policemen and a UNP candidate. No official inquiry was held into the destruction of the library.

On the same day, two senior UNP ministers—Gamini Dissanayaka, a close political associate of President J.R. Jayawardena, and Cyril Mathew—arrived in Jaffna with more thugs to direct operations. They were widely accused of ballot rigging to such an extent that in some areas there were more ballots than voters. Their arrival coincided with the arrest of TULF leader A. Amirthalingam. On election day police detained three more leaders—Navaratnam, Dharmaratnam and Sivasithambaram. Despite these actions the UNP could muster only 23,302 votes while the TULF received 263,269 votes wining all DDC seats.

The UNP government, like the previous Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led coalition, relied on stirring up Sinhala chauvinism to shore up its own base amid growing discontent caused by a deteriorating economy and its own turn to open market reforms. Its ability to do so depended above all on the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which in 1964 had abandoned the perspective of socialist internationalism and joined the SLFP government of Sirimo Bandaranaike. In 1972, as part of the SLFP coalition, LSSP minister Colvin R. de Silva was responsible for entrenching Buddhism as the state religion and a Sinhala-only language policy in the constitution. When the UNP won office in a landslide in 1977 as a result of widespread opposition to the coalition's policies, it further inflamed communal sentiment.

Cyril Mathew, one of the two ministers dispatched to Jaffna immediately after the burning of the library, was notorious for his anti-Tamil racism. He was the author of a book entitled *Sinhalese! Rise to Protect Buddhism* and a series of his inflammatory speeches made in 1979 were collected together in a pamphlet *Who is the Tiger*, which was passed from hand to hand.

Other writings indicate the character of the political climate being created by Colombo politicians and the media. A vicious pamphlet entitled *The Diabolical Conspiracy* published in 1980 accused Tamil teachers of giving high marks to Tamil students thus allowing them to enter university in preference to Sinhalese students. This is “a burning question... exploding within the hearts of Sinhala students, parents and teachers,” it stated. Another document denounced Tamil plantation workers warning “we see that Sinhala culture, Buddhism and the up-country villagers will all vanish.” It went on to attack Tamil traders, declaring that “the wholesale and retail trade... is now completely in the hands of Indian nationals.”

It was in this atmosphere that the UNP, with the backing of sections of the Buddhist clergy, unleashed groups of Sinhala thugs to physically attack Tamils, their homes and shops not only in the north and east of the island but also in the plantation districts in the central hills. The burning of the Jaffna Library marked a turning point in the process that led to the eruption of war.

The present Peoples Alliance government belatedly announced the decision to rebuild the library in 1998 amid growing demands from the major powers and sections of big business in Sri Lanka for a negotiated end to the war. At a meeting held to establish a temporary library, then PA Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera said: “The present government considers the destruction of the former library by forces of chauvinism and misguided politics as an evil act.”

Neither then nor now, however, did the PA government seek to identify either the “forces of chauvinism” or the character of their “misguided politics”. To do so would raise too many questions about the role of the SLFP and its other allies in the Peoples Alliance in promoting the chauvinist politics that lay behind the burning of the Jaffna library and other outrages against the Tamil minority that led to the outbreak of war.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site