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# Colonial legacy, polarization and linguistic disenfranchisement: The case of the Sri Lankan War

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## ABSTRACT

We introduce a new ethnolinguistic polarization measure that takes into account the impact of historical factors on intergroup relations in Sri Lanka. During the colonial era, intergroup relations changed considerably due, in part, to the uneven spread of the English language on the island and its role in British governance. Accordingly, our measure is sensitive to regional differences in English language acquisition before independence. By using a data set on victims of terrorist attacks by district and war period during the protracted war in Sri Lanka, we find that our measure is more strongly correlated with the number of victims, and is associated with 70% more victims, on average, than is a polarization measure based on the context-independent linguistic distances between groups. Thus, the historical underpinnings of our measure illustrate in a quantitative manner the relevance of history for understanding patterns of civil conflict.

## 1. Introduction

Prominent historical events, such as the colonial experience, can affect subsequent economic development through their impact on intergroup relations and, in particular, the divisions within a society. Colonizers utilized ethnic identity for political, linguistic, historical, economic, or cultural purposes, and ethnic divisions are often linked to the societal backlash that gives rise to post-independence conflicts. Using the case of the Sri Lankan civil war, a conflict that lasted nearly 30 years taking the lives of an estimated 80,000–100,000 citizens (almost 0.5% of the total population), we show the relevance of the colonial legacy for the relationship between post-independence conflict and ethnolinguistic polarization.

We focus on linguistic disenfranchisement, that is, the marginalization of linguistic groups through restrictions on linguistic privileges, as one mechanism through which the shadow of the colonial experience on societal divisions could be perceived. Shortly after independence, the Sinhalese majority, by passing the Sinhala Only Act, barred access to higher education and public positions of citizens who were not fluent in Sinhalese. Linguistic disenfranchisement also altered access to public resources by disrupting clientelistic networks, which had been formed along ethnic lines during the colonial period and took advantage of its members' English language fluency. Such

policy changes are costly for society in terms of alienating groups whose linguistic rights have been restricted or denied (Ginsburgh et al., 2005). In the case of Sri Lanka, this policy led to a decline in the economic and political returns to both Tamil and English languages, and contributed to the divisions between the two major ethnic groups (Sinhalese and Tamils) on the island.

We situate our investigation in the well-established literature on polarization and conflict (Esteban and Ray, 1994; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005). In the competition for control over public resources, the machinery of the state, and, in particular, language policy, the stakes are often higher in more polarized societies, leading to a greater likelihood of violent conflict. While the concepts of polarization and disenfranchisement are, in general, not identical, they are closely linked to each other, especially in the case of two linguistic groups. We study whether a district's (the second-level administrative unit) ethnolinguistic polarization at independence explains the pattern of district-level violence in the several decades later conflict.

To demonstrate the impact of the colonial legacy, we compare the effects of two measures of polarization, which we define precisely in Section 3. The first uses linguistic distances to determine divisions between groups, and is henceforth called the L-index (Desmet et al., 2009). While this index captures linguistic disenfranchisement, it fails to discriminate between post-independence divisions and those with

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colonial roots. To remedy this, we introduce the E-index, which allows the colonial legacy to directly influence intergroup divisions. The colonial authorities' reliance on English language speakers, accompanied by no real widespread effort to educate the population in English, led to large differences in economic and political opportunities and increased the scope for post-independence disenfranchisement. As such, divisions between groups in the E-index increase with the intensity of English language acquisition during British rule.

We make use of a novel data set on the total number of victims of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attacks, constructed by Plotnikov (2011) from various published sources that are detailed in the Online Appendix A. This measure accurately tracks one of the main suppliers of violent conflict during the war. These data do not include victims of pogroms, which were serious in certain districts, nor victims of attacks primarily associated with other groups, and therefore offer one particular view of the conflict. Using these data, we regress the total number of LTTE attack victims per 100,000 capita by district (20 districts at independence) and by war period (5 periods) on each of the two polarization indices to check which one is more strongly associated with the dependent variable, conditional on the few, district-level geographic and socioeconomic factors that we could unearth.

In Section 2, we present evidence that the conflict was also triggered by disenfranchising those who had some education in English language. Since the E-index captures this effect while the L-index does not, we would expect the first to exhibit a stronger association with the conflict than the latter one does. We thus argue that the cross-district differences in the change in the degree of fluency in English during the colonial period – which was itself largely determined by historical accident – contributed to the cross-district variation in linguistic disenfranchisement, and therefore tensions between groups, polarization and war.

Our econometric results, based on OLS estimation, show that the E-index indeed has an effect that is statistically larger than the one of the L-index. This indicates that the colonial legacy embedded in the E-index seems to be an important factor in determining the impact of polarization on conflict. The magnitude of the effects is large. According to the L-index, an increase from no divisions to maximum polarization is associated with an increase in conflict of about 25% of the range of the dependent variable in the average district, while one can attribute as many as 70% more victims to a similar change in the E-index.

We entertain two alternative determinants of the conflict, which could explain the correlation between our polarization measures and the conflict. The first is state-sponsored resettlement. Laitin (2000) argues that the true cause of the conflict is the internal colonization of the Sinhalese following independence in areas where they did not have a majority. The second determinant is religious divisions. In Sri Lanka, ethnolinguistic groups closely mirrored religious ones. Accounting for these determinants does not significantly alter relationship between the E-index and the LTTE victims per capita.

Our paper belongs to a growing empirical literature on why history matters for current economic outcomes<sup>1</sup> as well as the literature on ethnolinguistic diversity and economic outcomes. Specifically, we address the debate on the role of ethnic divisions in violent conflict and how colonial history shapes the impact of these divisions. We follow the trend in this literature to control for omitted institutional and other country-level factors by exploiting within-country variation. Our contribution is to use a historiographic method to determine the divisions in society and quantitatively show their impact on current outcomes.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the history of the English language on the island under British rule, the extent of linguistic disenfranchisement and the civil war. Section 3 presents and compares polarization measures. Section 4 describes the data and Section 5 analyzes the results. Section 6 concludes.

## 2. The history of the civil conflict

As with any prolonged conflict, the complexity of the potential causes and feedback mechanisms make it difficult to give a conclusive treatment. There is obviously no unique answer to why the tensions between the Tamils and the Sinhalese escalated into a full-blown civil war, and historians who wrote on the conflict disagree. The first set focuses on several key parliamentary actions that significantly hindered the Tamil population. Others point to demographic reasons and the very large Tamil population located on the sub-continent of India, whose presence may have caused the Sinhalese to have the desperation of an afflicted minority group (Tambiah, 1986). Kapferer (1988) argues that the political legitimization of custom and myth, which differed for the Sinhalese and Tamils, raised the stakes of control over public resources. This is what Tambiah (1986, p. 1, 7) writes in the starting paragraphs of his book: “How could such a people and such a blessed island be capable of the horrendous riots that exploded in late July and early August of 1983? The story is a complex one and especially difficult to tell, for the island's chronicles and inscriptions go back to the first centuries A.D. and successive waves of immigrants and generations of descendants can refer back to alleged precedents and paradigms and mythic charters to string together rhetorical accounts as to why and how things were and are as they are,” though he surmises that “the Sinhalese tensions and conflicts in the form known to us today are of relatively recent manufacture – a truly twentieth-century phenomenon.”

In what follows, we discuss the possible consequences of the colonial legacy and the post-independence policies of linguistic disenfranchisement on the conflict that took place over the course of three decades.

### 2.1. The colonial roots of linguistic disenfranchisement

Sri Lanka had been under colonial occupation since the 16th century, first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch and finally by the British in 1796 (the whole island coming under control in 1815) until independence. In early 19th century, American missionaries started to teach English in the northern part of the island, where the share of Tamils was much larger, far from the southwest and center of the island where the tea and other plantations were located and “monopolized” Tambiah (1986, p. 66) by the Sinhalese.<sup>2</sup> The British were initially not interested in English language training, even though the English-speaking native population was virtually nonexistent.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the Dutch, the island had been endowed with a number of vernacular schools and the British did not see any reason to convert these to English schools. In fact, the British viewed English language training as “unfit” for most of the population, Tamil and Sinhalese speakers alike (Brutt-Griffler, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Their efforts centered around the Vaddukkodai (Batticotta) Seminary on Jaffna peninsula. The decision of Americans to locate in the north was a historical accident. American missionaries had wanted to go to Calcutta, India, but were not welcome because of the War of 1812. After fleeing India for Sri Lanka, a member of the group became friendly with the governor of Ceylon, who encouraged setting up a mission on the island. The Americans were, in turn, interested in Sri Lanka because of its proximity to the many Tamils in South India. The British authorities then restricted the Americans to the north because of security concerns (Root, 1916).

<sup>3</sup> The one exception was the Burghers, who used English in trade with Europe.

<sup>4</sup> This policy changed dramatically for a brief period under the leadership of Colebrooke, a British administrator sent to the colony in 1829 by the imperial government to ascertain why the country was losing money. Colebrooke, who strongly advocated English training and use, had been impressed by the effort of American missionaries in teaching English (British missionaries spread Christianity in the vernacular). Following Colebrooke's radical reforms, the British aimed at English language instruction all across the island but due to poor instruction the outcome was low literacy with pockets of literacy centered around areas with good teachers. One such inspection of a British school led to the following reaction: “In several Anglo-vernacular schools which I have visited, the teacher supposed to teach English has been quite unable to converse with me in English, and it has been necessary for the inspector who accompanied me to act as interpreter” (Government of Ceylon, 1879, quoted in Coperehewa, 2011). The lack of success led the British to shut down English training in many government schools.

<sup>1</sup> See Nunn (2009) for a review of this literature.

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