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Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict

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In the past decade, Sri Lanka has been engulfed by political tragedy as successive governments have failed to settle the grievances of the Tamil minority in a way acceptable to the majority Sinhala population. The new Premadasa presidency faces huge economic and political problems with large sections of the island under the control of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) and militant separatist Tamil groups operating in the north and south.
This book is not a conventional political history of Sri Lanka. Instead, it attempts to shed fresh light on the historical roots of the ethnic crisis and uses a combination of historical and anthropologial evidence to challenge the widely-held belief that the conflict in Sri Lanka is simply the continuation of centuries of animosity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The authors show how modern ethnic identities have been made and re-made since the colonial period with the war between Tamils and the Sinhala-dominant government accompanied by rhetorical wars over archeological sites and place-name etymologies, and the political use of the national past. The book is also one of the first attempts to focus on local perceptions of the crisis and draws on a broad range of sources, from village fieldwork to newspaper controversies. Its interest extends beyond contemporary politics to history, anthropology and development studies.

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