

What of the Tamil Diaspora?

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Is there a disjuncture between the Diaspora and Tamils living in Sri Lanka? From what I can gather, Tamils in Sri Lanka seem almost relieved that the war is over, too exhausted and beaten down to be angry; resigned to the day-to-day injustices they face but cautiously hopeful about the future. They even seem open to a just political settlement, if somewhat skeptical about its plausibility.

But a passionate, politicized, vocal Diaspora across the globe wants its homeland. Eelam. And as we see in reports from all over the world, they don't look ready to surrender it just yet.

Sonali Samarasinghe Wickramatunge wrote an opinion piece on the Guardian's website in April in which she generously (and hopefully) says that "For many Tamils, Eelam has become merely a temporary rallying point: a soapbox upon which to make a desperate international plea to stop the slaughter of their people." While this may be true for some in the Diaspora today, there is a sizeable portion of the Diaspora that genuinely believes there is no solution other than a separate homeland because the aim of all Sinhalese-dominated governments will always be to marginalize, or worse, exterminate, all Tamils. That may explain why they were able to blind themselves to the L.T.T.E.'s reign of fear and its systematic destruction of all viable political avenues for Tamils other than its own self-serving military solution.

Anger with the present government and its callous disregard for Tamil civilians in this battle has also recently pushed almost the entire desperate international Tamil community towards the L.T.T.E. While a marginal portion of this Tamil support was focused on the current crisis, a large part of the Diaspora's fealty to the L.T.T.E. has hardened over the years to become an unshakeable, unquestioning cult-like devotion. And they have passed this on to their children, the generation of M.I.A., who see no shades of gray and no possibility of peaceful co-existence in this epic battle between good and evil. Diaspora Tamils no longer pay a price for clinging to their vision of Eelam, unlike their brethren in Sri Lanka who have, in the end, had to pay a high price for it.

Yet the Diaspora is not monolithic, and there is a part of it that has been crowded out, even silenced, by the dominance of the pro-Eelam faction. Since the L.T.T.E. made sure all Tamil political settlements that did not include a separate state were taken off the table, this part of the Diaspora was left with little to rally behind.

So I wonder, when we talk about non-violent political solutions for Sri Lankan Tamils, what role the Diaspora will play in facilitating or debilitating them? Will the pro-Eelam theme continue to dominate? Will this faction support the relatively mundane business of negotiated political solutions that will involve imperfect compromises on all sides? It seems to me that for a significant part of the Diaspora the narrative of a persecuted people, driven from their homeland, their loyal soldiers defeated in battle defending that land, may be more appealing to hold onto, for a host of complex reasons. One of those reasons may be our underlying need, as humans, to feel connected to a homeland. For Tamils who feel so betrayed by the Sri Lankan state, Eelam represents that existential space in which one's imaginary self is whole and at peace.

But will the more moderate elements of the Tamil Diaspora be able to unify, find the motivation to organize politically, and support the Tamils in Sri Lanka find a just resolution? If the GoSL were to

put forth genuinely viable political options on the table (a big 'if' given the current government), it will be interesting to see what roles the various elements of the Diaspora will play, if any. If there is no reasonable political solution, support for the pro-Eelam faction of the Diaspora could grow and morph into an even more formidable force than it is today.

P.S.

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