

South Asia

## Tamil Nationalism: Ducking the Issues

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Although the prospects of a military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rose with every setback suffered by the LTTE since its retreat from the Eastern Province in 2007, its rapid collapse from early 2009 surprised many observers including opponents and critics. Many questions concerning the failure of the LTTE to assess correctly the military situation remain unanswered.

Most Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists, especially among the diaspora, think that the defeat was due to betrayal by India. Many complain that the West, especially the US, too let down the LTTE by failing to intervene. There are also those who argue that weapons supplied by China did the damage, while some seek to justify the conduct of the Indian government based on the rising Chinese and, to a less extent, Pakistani influence in Sri Lanka.

Such explanations miss the point that the West as well as India wanted the elimination of the LTTE as a military force. The US was happy to disarm the LTTE using the negotiating table while weakening it through inducing divisions, whereas the Indian establishment desired the annihilation of the LTTE.

Some think that the LTTE would have survived to return to a position of strength, had it reverted to guerrilla warfare after its defeat in the East. Although this is speculation, resorting to guerrilla warfare would have spared the lives of many LTTE cadres as well as leaders, and more importantly the tens of thousands of civilians killed in the last few months of the war. It could also have averted the ending up of 280,000 in poorly sheltered detention camps, the maiming of well over 20,000, and other known and yet unknown forms of suffering.

What are missing in the explanations above for the defeat of the LTTE are the political reasons. The LTTE, like other Tamil nationalist movements, was never a mass movement, and all along it placed armed struggle above politics. Its anti-democratic approach, resentment of criticism and intolerance to opposition had their roots in Tamil nationalist politics, but the LTTE surpassed all predecessors. Also, besides its reluctance to oppose imperialism, it pinned its hopes on the imperialists as its fortunes declined in the battlefield.

The events of the past several months lead to important questions that are being avoided by nationalists of all shades, including those who support the government.

It is probably true that the people willingly followed the LTTE as it retreated from Kilinochchi at the end of 2008. But as life became harder, many wanted to cross over to government controlled territory, and the LTTE used force, including shooting at people who attempted to leave, to prevent them from leaving. Why did the LTTE insist on the people remaining with it even as the territory held by it was shrinking and difficulties mounted in meeting the basic needs of the people under its control, especially in the context of the government severely restricting if not blocking the supply of essential goods?

The LTTE could not have been ignorant of the firepower possessed by the Sri Lankan armed forces

and their willingness to use it at tremendous risk to human life. The LTTE also knew that its military supplies had been effectively intercepted and severely curtailed since 2007 with the help of the Indian military intelligence. Did the LTTE seriously expect that some major power would intervene to save it and avert the impending disaster?

Those who encouraged the Tamils at home and among the diaspora to believe that intervention in some form was impending from the US, the UN and even some European countries include the Tamil elite among the diaspora who still believe in lobbying politicians, and includes the group calling itself 'Tamils for Obama'. Tamil elitist support in the West called for unqualified support for the LTTE, and refused to distinguish between the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils demanding a just and lasting solution to the national question and the LTTE which claimed to be their sole spokesperson, with rapidly declining justification for such a claim. Why did the LTTE leadership wait until the last moment to announce its surrender? Why did it not let the people leave even when it was clear that military defeat was imminent? If any false hope was given to the LTTE leadership, who or what was its source?

There are also questions relating to the surrender and killing of the LTTE leadership which are as embarrassing to the government as to the supporters of the LTTE, which had demanded of its cadres to commit suicide rather than surrender.

Interestingly, LTTE spokespersons among the diaspora still debate Pirapakaran's demise. The claim that he is still alive seems to be based on more dubious reasons than blind faith. Those who claim that he is alive seem to have control over much of the wealth accumulated for fighting the cause of Tamil Eelam. Funds came mainly from the Tamil diaspora, although contributions were not always voluntary.

The hope that the LTTE will revive as a fighting force is fast receding among the faithful. Meantime, the idea of setting up a 'Trans-National Government of Tamil Eelam' is being promoted by a section of the elite, who accept the demise of the leader. K Pathmanathan, a Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TNGTE) promoter who was named the leader of the LTTE among the diaspora since the fall of the LTTE, is now in the custody of the Sri Lankan government. The circumstances of his alleged abduction from a hotel in Malaysia and deportation from Thailand suggest possible surrender, the denial of which suits both the TNGTE elite and the Sri Lankan government.

Internationally, the stock of the Sri Lankan government is low, mainly in view of the detention under unacceptable condition of Tamils 'freed from the control of the LTTE', let alone charges of war crimes and human rights abuses by its armed forces. The Tamil elite among the diaspora is seeking solace in the prospect of the West punishing Sri Lanka, based on some of the harsh criticism emanating from the US, UN and the EU. But they hardly realise that charges of war crimes and human rights violations only serve to bring wayward states into line and not to bring offenders to book and even less to rectify wrongs.

What is evident among the Tamil diaspora is that they are being fed with false hope to avert any serious analysis of what went wrong with the struggle for Tamil Eelam.

The situation in Sri Lanka is similar, with the Tamil nationalist leaders reluctant to discuss pressing issues concerning the plight of the Tamils. Despite superficial political differences, they are, as a whole, reluctant to seriously discuss or debate their political past and the failed armed struggle. As in the past, it is safer for them to blame 'traitors' and point to external factors with which they are not associated so that they can continue to fool the Tamil people the way they did for over half a century.

But changes are evident across the Tamil political landscape. Elections to the local authorities in the

North were recently held by the government in a bid to show that life there was returning to normal. The New Democratic Party called for a boycott of the elections, but under prevailing conditions could not actively campaign for a boycott.

The people had their own ideas. In the election for the Jaffna Municipal Council nearly 80% of the voters kept off, with more than 6% of those voting spoiling their ballot papers. Voting in the Vavuniya Urban Council was just over 50% with over 5% of ballot papers spoilt, despite impersonation, intimidation and other 'customary democratic practices'. There was no overwhelming support for any political grouping whether pro-government or not.

That is food for thought.

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**P.S.**

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