The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora after the LTTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the past quarter-century the Tamil diaspora has shaped the Sri Lankan political landscape through its financial and ideological support to the military struggle for an independent Tamil state. Although the May 2009 defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has dramatically reduced the diaspora’s influence, the majority of Tamils outside Sri Lanka continue to support a separate state, and the diaspora’s money can ensure it plays a role in the country’s future. The nature of that role, however, depends largely on how Colombo deals with its Tamil citizens in the coming months and on how strongly the international community presses the government to enact constitutional reforms to share power with and protect the rights of Tamils and other minorities. While the million-strong diaspora cannot regenerate an insurgency in Sri Lanka on its own, its money and organisation could turn up the volume on any violence that might eventually re-emerge.

Following the defeat of the LTTE, the mood in the diaspora has been a mix of anger, depression and denial. Although many had mixed feelings about the LTTE, it was widely seen as the only group that stood up for Tamils and won them any degree of respect. The Tigers’ humiliating defeat, the enormous death toll in the final months of the war and the internment of more than a quarter million Tamils left the diaspora feeling powerless, betrayed by the West, demanding justice and, in some cases, wanting revenge. A minority in the community is happy the LTTE is gone, since it directed much of its energy to intimidating and even killing those Tamils who challenged their rule.

Funding networks established by the LTTE over decades are seriously weakened but still in place. There is little chance, however, of the Tigers regrouping in the diaspora. LTTE leaders in Sri Lanka are dead or captured and its overseas structures are in disarray. Clinging to the possibility of victory long after defeat was inevitable damaged the LTTE’s credibility and weakened its hold on the community.

Nonetheless, most Tamils abroad remain profoundly committed to Tamil Eelam, the existence of a separate state in Sri Lanka. This has widened the gap between the diaspora and Tamils in Sri Lanka. Most in the country are exhausted by decades of war and are more concerned with rebuilding their lives under difficult circumstances than in continuing the struggle for an independent state. There is no popular support for a return to armed struggle. Without the LTTE to enforce a common political line, Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka are proposing substantial reforms within a united Sri Lanka. Unwilling to recognise the scale of defeat, and
continuing to believe an independent state is possible, however, many diaspora leaders have dismissed Tamil politicians on the island either as traitors for working with the government or as too weak or scared to stand up for their people’s rights.

Many now reluctantly recognise the need for new forms of struggle, even if they would still prefer the LTTE fighting. New organisations have formed that are operating in more transparent and democratic ways than the LTTE and that aim to pressure Western governments to accept an independent state for Tamils. These include plans for a “transnational government of Tamil Eelam”, independent referenda among Tamils in various countries endorsing the call for a separate state, boycotts against products made in Sri Lanka and advocacy in support of international investigations into alleged war crimes by the Sri Lankan state. The new initiatives, however, refrain from criticising the LTTE or holding it responsible for its own crimes or its contribution to the shattered state of Sri Lankan Tamil society.

So long as this is the case, most Western governments will remain sceptical of the diaspora’s post-LTTE political initiatives. All have kept the transnational government of Tamil Eelam at arm’s length given its resemblance to a government-in-exile, even if the group does not claim this status. Western governments will have little choice but to engage with the dominant, pro-separatist Tamil organisations, even if officials would prefer to deal only with the handful of interlocutors with a record of criticising the Tigers. But until it moves on from its separatist, pro-LTTE ideology, the diaspora is unlikely to play a useful role supporting a just and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.

Watching the devastation of the final months of the war and the seeming indifference of governments and the United Nations, many Tamils, particularly the younger generation born in the West, grew deeply disillusioned. Governments with large Tamil communities have been worried this might lead to new forms of militancy. In the last months of the war and months immediately following, there were self-immolations by Tamil protestors, vandalism against Sri Lankan embassies, and increased communal tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese abroad. While such events have grown less frequent, risks of radicalism in the diaspora cannot be dismissed entirely.

While Tamils have the democratic right to espouse separatism non-violently, Tamil Eelam has virtually no domestic or international backing. With the Sri Lankan government assuming Tamils abroad remain committed to violent means, the diaspora’s continued calls for a separate state feed the fears of the Rajapaksa administration and provide excuses for maintaining destructive anti-terrorism and emergency laws.
To ensure the current peace is a lasting one, the Sri Lankan government must address the legitimate grievances at the root of the conflict: the political marginalisation and physical insecurity of most Tamils in Sri Lanka. Statements made by President Mahinda Rajapaksa since his January 2010 re-election suggest there is little chance the needed political and constitutional reforms will be offered in his next term. Any significant improvement in the political position of Tamils and other minorities in Sri Lanka will thus come slowly and with difficulty, requiring significant shifts in the balance of political power within Sri Lanka as well as careful but tough persuasion from outside.

India, Japan, Western governments and multilateral organisations can do much more to assist the political empowerment of Tamils in Sri Lanka and press Colombo to address the causes behind the rise of the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups. There should be no blank cheque for Colombo to redevelop the north and east without first creating a political climate where Tamils and Muslims can freely express their opinions and have a meaningful role in determining the future of the areas where they have long been the majority. Donor governments and the UN should also press more strongly for an independent inquiry into the thousands of civilians, almost all Tamil, killed in the final months of fighting. Their aid should be tied to an end to impunity for human rights violations and abuses of political power that undermine democracy and threaten the freedoms of Sri Lankans from all ethnic communities.

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