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# The simulated politics of diaspora

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2011 - Avril 2011 - English -

Date de mise en ligne : Monday 28 March 2011

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### **If you listen to nationalists within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, it's still the mid-1970s, and a Tamil Eelam is right around the corner.**

President Mahinda Rajapakse's very public failure to gain recognition in a quintessentially British elite establishment, the Oxford Union, exposes his confused strategy towards the West. The President's grandiloquent claims about his 'anti imperialist' credentials run contrary to his desire to be feted by his old colonial masters, and to be rehabilitated with them. This, we must remember, is a President who warmly embraced the Bush doctrine of the 'war on terror' and now upholds neoliberal solutions of economic development as the panacea to all of Sri Lanka's problems.

Having conquered the LTTE, the President and his nationalist allies now want to take on the Tamil diaspora overseas. If so, however, the Oxford Union debacle was a signal that the regime is far from clear on how to do so. The reality is that the regime can only make the diaspora 'irrelevant' by alleviating the plight of the Tamils displaced by war in Sri Lanka, making the reconciliation process transparent and independent, and by sitting down with the minorities in the country to discuss their political future.

While the Rajapakse regime's exclusivist Sinhala ultra-nationalist position is not lost on anyone, the Oxford incident also highlighted the shortcomings of the Tamil nationalist diaspora's campaign to internationalise the plight of the Tamils. The demonstration by diaspora Tamils holding Tiger flags indicates that it is of no consequence to them that the LTTE is now discredited amongst Lankan Tamils. Does this movement's evolution, at its heart, speak for the Tamils of Sri Lanka, or is it bent on creating a pseudo-politics for its own misguided ends? The Tamil-nationalist diaspora community is pursuing as delusional a strategy as the Rajapakse regime, banking on Western governments and institutions to offer deliverance to the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Distancing themselves from the LTTE's armed violence, the leaders of the Tamil nationalist diaspora are also engaged in hard lobbying of governments and institutions to rehabilitate themselves. Pressurising these governments to prevail upon the Sri Lankan government is currently their sole strategy.

The diaspora seems to believe that, despite the decimation of the LTTE, it will be able to deliver self-determination

and independent nationhood for the Tamils through its diplomatic efforts. It has a very short memory, forgetting its bitterness at how the international community did not come to the aid of the LTTE and the beleaguered Tamils in May 2009, at the end of the three-decade war. As recent history would tell us, the contest between the Sri Lankan State and the Tamil nationalist diaspora, in wooing the West and winning favours, has not brought dividends to either party, or to the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

Diaspora nationalism is often a hideous caricature of its original version. Nationalisms of ethnic groups in their own habitats often have to deal with the vicissitudes of accompanying political and economic developments, the aspirations of contesting identities, the changing realities and the possibilities therein. In the diaspora, on the other hand, nationalism can be incubated in a bubble, its ambitions becoming almost an abstract fetish, with an autonomous logic of its own, bearing no relation to changing realities on the ground. Over the years, this writer has seen such bubble-logic firsthand. For instance, at a 2004 meeting of the international watchdog Human Rights Watch in London, dissenting Tamil activists (including this writer) were verbally attacked by both pro-LTTE activists for 'daring' to criticise the LTTE, and by Sinhalese nationalists who eventually held up a map of India and Sri Lanka, to tell the Tamils while pointing to India, 'Go back to your country!'

### **Dangerous guilt**

There is no doubt that the nationalist Tamil community in the West has embraced nationalism with greater fervour than the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Over the years of war, after all, the latter gradually became disillusioned with the liberation struggle – the internecine fighting amongst the militant groups, the autocracy of the LTTE, and its callous disregard for the Tamil people's welfare. All of this worked to dispel the myth of nationalism.

In the West, on the other hand, most members of the nationalist diaspora have not had the same experiences of living through the war. However, they left behind families and communities who they have subsequently felt an obligation to support. As the war intensified, information and propaganda about the sufferings of Tamils back home resonated through the diaspora, mobilising many to support the separatist cause. This soon became a money-making venture for the LTTE lobby, as a complex sense of nostalgia, longing, guilt and exile got fashioned into political solidarity. This continues today: at this year's Heroes Day celebrations in London, on 27 November, nearly 10,000 people were in attendance. The LTTE might be gone but Tamil nationalism lives on in the diaspora.

Like any other migrant community, Sri Lankan Tamils have banded together in their host countries as a strategy for survival. Affected by the vagaries of racism, discrimination and economic deprivation, the diaspora Tamils have organised in order to gain political representation and equal treatment. Tamil nationalism becomes the underpinning ideology that facilitates such mobilisation in multicultural cities such as London and Toronto. Tamils have now penetrated local government structures, having won elections using the Tamil vote-bank with rallying cries of Tamil nationalism. The local politicians in precincts with large Tamil presence attend rallies organised by the Tamil nationalist lobby, which in turn is interpreted as the local political establishment backing the Tamil nationalist cause. These are methods of buying political influence and goodwill within the main parties of government in the UK and Canada, and it must be admitted that in this regard Tamils are no different from other migrant communities.

The majority of diaspora Tamils are from the Northern Province (indeed, mostly from the Jaffna peninsula), from upper-caste and lower-middle or middle-class backgrounds. Also, the vast majority are here to stay, and have little material stake in what happens back home. The poor, those from Dalit or lower-caste communities, and those from more marginalised areas (such as Mannar, Amparai or Batticaloa) have left in much smaller numbers. These other groups of Tamils do not feature prominently within the nationalist lobby in the diaspora – and express doubts about the current nationalist campaigns. It is the elite leadership of the Tamil diaspora, which once backed the LTTE, that now invests its faith in the Western governments and campaigns hard to buy some leverage with them.

### Diaspora vacuum

The LTTE left the Tamil community bereft of a credible leadership. While its departure has left the field clear for a variety of independent leaders to emerge, the Tamil community largely remains quiescent, unable to find a voice. The nationalists in the diaspora are now staking a claim to the mantle of the LTTE to represent Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan state's ongoing failure to deal with the problems facing the Tamils on the ground gives energy to this movement. What the diaspora nationalist community forgets, however, is that while the Sri Lankan state played its part, the total political disenfranchisement and subjugation of the Tamil people was wrought by the LTTE – with the backing of the diaspora – over the war years. The diaspora leadership abdicated its responsibility towards the Tamil people by being dismissive about the LTTE's transgressions, including serving innocents up for slaughter by the armed forces in the final phase of the war.

Some in the diaspora nationalist community are currently attempting to distance themselves from their original ideological moorings of LTTE militarism and nationalism. But keen observers can see no evidence of a departure, either ideologically or politically, from the erstwhile LTTE positions, beyond a welcome disavowal of armed struggle with positions on independent statehood and separatism remaining unchanged. On the other hand, the diaspora nationalists are confronted by a general splintering. Previously, the LTTE exercised highly centralised control over its diaspora outfits; but of late, multiple factions have emerged. For the new groups, future control and use of the large funds and assets left behind by the LTTE has become an increasingly contentious issue. The absence of the LTTE thus presents a power vacuum not just in Sri Lanka but among the diaspora organisations as well.

Since the end of the war, three events have been particularly significant for the diaspora. The first was the seeking of a re-endorsement of the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976 – which put forward that the demand for an independent Tamil state – through an international referendum in April 2010 amongst diaspora Tamils. Second was the setting-up of what is known as the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), through an election held among diaspora Tamils in May 2010. Third, a Global Tamil Forum (GTF) has been set up, an alliance of important diaspora Tamil-nationalist groups.

In fact, the Vaddukoddai resolution, if not flawed to begin with, is now certainly redundant. The TGTE and the GTF reiterate the principle of self-determination and the pursuit of independent nationhood utilising the same format, language and principles as the Tamil political parties did more than three decades ago. These organisations are not paying heed to the very public expressions of bitterness that were made about the diaspora's role during the war by many displaced in the Vanni – much less enunciating any need for introspection on what went wrong within the Tamil national struggle.

At the same time, suspicions are being raised even within the Tamil diaspora itself regarding the exact motivations of the renewed nationalist push. After all, earlier, there was an LTTE, waging war in the island for an independent state; today, however, there is no force on the ground. As such, some are questioning whether the recent actions have really been money-making schemes in righteous nationalist garb. The collection of funds and sale of nationalist paraphernalia amongst the diaspora communities still continue.

In attempting to reconstruct a nationalist political movement amongst diaspora Tamils – without reference to what is happening on the ground in Sri Lanka – these groups are trying to create a Tamil nationalist politics and discourse overseas to parallel that back home. Indeed, this parallel politics is replete with elections and referendums, all taking place among a Tamil population that really has no wish to return. This political practice can only be termed a simulated politics, a distortion of the hopes and desire of Tamils on the ground, expending huge energies and resources but lacking in substance – and, as a result, legitimacy.

### Obsession with separation

## The simulated politics of diaspora

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The diaspora today needs to recognise that the Tamil community's future lies in peaceful democratic coexistence with the other two primary communities on the island. The problems that Tamils face are immense, especially in the face of growing Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and state repression; but they are also inextricably intertwined with the issues faced by the other communities, such as land, livelihood territory and political power. The politics of diasporic Tamil nationalism, on the other hand, continue to prescribe separate development, which will ghettoise and marginalise Tamils further.

Even if the Sri Lankan state does not offer solutions, politics can begin at the grassroots with negotiation, mediation and building alliances with the other communities and political groupings. Tamils need to demand accommodation at the heart of the Sri Lankan polity, and wrest a foothold and stake in the country's political mainstream. The Tamils from the east, Mannar, the hill country, and Dalits and women who do not have a voice in the diaspora's nationalist project need to be a part of this mainstream. One must note that none of the programmes of the diaspora nationalists indicates any interest in speaking to the Muslims, a community that suffered horrifically at the hands of the LTTE. The sterile incantation of self-determination and nationhood expose how out of touch the diaspora Tamil nationalists are with people on the ground.

The diaspora Tamils activists must now decide whether they want to sing from an old hymn sheet, in a different key, creating dissonance with what progressive activists – Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim – in Sri Lanka are hoping to build: a movement for democracy, to challenge the Rajapakse regime's efforts at dismantling Sri Lankan democracy. What the diaspora nationalists must understand is that its members are not the protagonists in this theatre of politics. Instead, the people of Sri Lanka are, including the Tamils, who need to play a central role.

*Post-scriptum :*

*This article was published in Himal, January 2011.*

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