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LTTE:

The collapse and after

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How has the LTTE come to this current point of near defeat? In a discussion organised by the Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the City University in New York in February, moderated by Himal Southasian contributing editor Ahilan Kadirgamar, Ragavan and Nirmala Rajasingam, former LTTE members now living in exile in the UK, analysed the factors leading up to the LTTE's loss of military control. Nirmala, the first woman detained by the Colombo government under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, in the early 1980s, was subsequently freed from prison in a dramatic action by the LTTE. She eventually left the Tigers, however, due to what she felt was a lack of democracy within the movement, coupled with its human rights abuses. After ten years with the movement, Ragavan, a founding member of the LTTE, likewise parted ways, due to its

increasingly authoritarian character and internal abuses.

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Ahilan Kadirgamar: Many people now believe that the LTTE is on its last legs. If so, what were the factors that led to the collapse of an organisation that enjoyed an army, a large territorial base and even an air force?

Ragavan: A major problem that the LTTE faces today comes from its authoritarian culture and militaristic structure, in which the political objective is subservient to the military goal. Initially, after 1983, when the LTTE was still a guerrilla force in need of the people's support, it received considerable backing from the Tamil masses.



LTTE on the brink of defeat with the successful military operations. AFP

As it grew, the LTTE's primary agenda gradually became the building of a conventional army with a repressive character and an absence of any liberatory objectives. This alienated the population because it came hand in hand with harsh practices such as the forcible recruitment of children, taxation and other forms of control.

During the Norwegian peace process the LTTE, instead of using the resources and money allocated to support the people under its control, appropriated the funds and resources to build up its own infrastructure, such as its sophisticated arsenal and air-conditioned bunkers for its leaders. They became parasites who lived off the people

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without giving back anything to them. Ultimately, a contradiction arose between its original goal, of fighting for the rights of the Tamil people, and the reality of military control over those very people.

Nirmala Rajasingam: The LTTE proceeded to become more and more unpopular amongst the local population in areas where it garnered control.

It also became less accountable to the people because of external support, initially from the Indian government and subsequently from diaspora communities in Europe and North America. Yet even within the diaspora communities that were funding its cause, the LTTE practised intimidation through threats, physical assault and even murder.

The dissenting community has been campaigning against the absolute totalitarian command of the LTTE for quite some years now. Mahinda Rajapaksa may claim that the fall of the LTTE is due to the military powers of his armed forces, but I think that the political decline of the LTTE started some years before, in particular during the Norwegian-brokered peace talks of 2002.

That is when the people decided that they were so worn out by the war that, just to live without the disruption and violence of war, they would even submit to living with the army's presence.

Ragavan: Another major reason for the LTTE's demise is its bid for sole representation and, to that end, the banning of all Tamil political parties and killing of all other likeminded political leaders and cadres, thereby estranging large sections of the population.



Ragavan

The LTTE does not encourage political discussion, and is intolerant of criticism internally and externally. A case in point is when, in 2004, the LTTE was unable to amicably resolve disagreements between Velupillai Prabhakaran and 'Karuna', the top Eastern commander. This led to Karuna's defection, and consequently brought the whole Eastern Province under government control.

Nirmala: To add further, army reports have surfaced revealing that some of the military's most effective informants were former members of the LTTE who faced internal repression and left the organisation. One could not easily escape and survive the LTTE's hunting-down, and so the defectors would surrender to the army for protection.

The army gained considerable advantage in 1993 when the military leader 'Mahattaya', along with 600-800 of his cadres, was murdered following a rift between Prabhakaran and Mahattaya. Because of internal developments, and the internecine warfare between Tamil militant groups, and because of the way the LTTE clamped down on Tamil society and took total control of the Tamils, many people began to have doubts. The struggle has completely sapped the energy of the Tamil people. They have even forgotten why they started this struggle. They have had enough.

To go back to the LTTE's rapid collapse, what are the external factors, and how do we weigh them against the internal factors?

Nirmala: Post-11 September 2001, the LTTE was proscribed by many of the Western countries. But despite the ban, the 2002 peace talks gave them legitimacy, and meanwhile no significant reduction in their activities was observed.

The LTTE just set up front organisations and continued with its regular course of action. But eventually, the increased surveillance weighed down on the Tigers, especially given their heavy reliance on the economic power base of the diaspora in the West.

And in the US, Britain, France and other countries, there were coordinated arrests of LTTE officers. This disabled them logistically, to a certain extent. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan State has really benefited from the 'war on terror' rhetoric, using it as

a convenient cover for its campaign against the LTTE. Aside from some noise about civilian suffering and casualties, this has been executed with the tacit support of the international community.

A number of militant groups came into being in the 1970s, during the period preceding the promulgation of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. What factors led their rise?

Nirmala: Sri Lanka has been wracked by its colonial legacy of ethnic conflict. Indeed, the seeds of division and ethnic antipathies and animosity were germinated during the colonial period itself. Despite claims of long histories of intractable ethnic conflict, this is very much a conflict of modern origin.



Nirmala Rajasingam

Right at the moment of Independence, the Sri Lankan state became a majoritarian state, with a government of elite leadership. Soon after that, we see a coming-together of a new array of forces, of lower-middle class and middle-class teachers, clerks, traders and Buddhist monks in the south questioning the elite leadership and deciding that this is the time to overthrow the colonial legacy and come into their own. The movement culminated in the 1956 general election.

What followed from the 1950s onwards was the burgeoning of a virulent form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and the passing of a series of discriminatory legislation against minorities and Tamils in particular.

The Sinhala Only Act was passed in 1956; the Republican Constitution was adopted in 1972, giving Buddhism a place of privilege in the constitution while removing the protection that was afforded minorities in the previous constitution; and immediately afterwards, the infamous policy of standardisation of marks for university admissions was also implemented in 1972, which Tamils found to be discriminatory.

This came alongside colonisation attempts that had begun in the 1950s in the Eastern Province, where a lot of Tamils lived, radically altering the local demography and reducing Tamil and Muslim representation in Parliament. Non-violent protests by Tamil parliamentarians and their supporters were responded to with periodic violence by the state, throughout this period.

In my opinion, the minority leadership did not quite understand the forces driving this Sinhala nationalism. Therefore, rather than build a strong grass roots democratic movement, the minority leaders felt that their problems could be fixed by going into deals with the political leadership at the Centre, thereby securing concessions for their communities.

The standard official narrative of Tamil nationalism will always tell us that the Tamil leadership waged a decades-long democratic struggle against the Sri Lankan state before giving way to the militant movement. I believe this to be incorrect.

The militarisation of the movement started not as a result of exhausting methods of protracted democratic struggle, but as a response to the 1972 standardisation of marks referred to earlier.

This affected a miniscule percentage (about 0.01 percent) of the Sri Lankan population - the Jaffna and Colombo Tamil middle-class and upper-class youth. Years of poor economic conditions during the 1960s and 1970s prompted the first JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) insurrection of mostly poor and rural Sinhala youth. Following its merciless putdown by the then government, the policy of standardisation was set forth to placate anti-government sentiment in the south.

This policy required Tamils to have higher marks for acceptance into university, which marginalised Tamil youths who looked to university education as a means to secure employment in the state sector.

The perceived discrimination catalysed the taking-up of arms by select middle- and lower-middle-class Tamil youth of Jaffna, initially. Recruitment of people from the

poorer sections of the Tamil community into the militant movement happened afterwards.

Because of the narrow class composition of the movement's leadership, many marginalised groups - Muslims, Up-country Tamils, Dalits, Tamils who hailed from the Eastern Province and the Vanni - were alienated and excluded from the so-called 'Tamil nation'. While the 'bourgeois' struggle waged on, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism responded with violence, through periodic government-instigated pogroms against the Tamils. It was after the Black July killings of 1983 that Tamil militancy mushroomed.

Is there a legitimacy for Tamil nationalism devoid of the LTTE? If not, can we think of a political solution outside the nationalist framework?

Ragavan: We need to look at it differently, because this nationalistic framework will only alienate people further. Tamils constitute 12 percent of Sri Lanka's population, and they have to join hands with the other minorities.

Tamil nationalism that does not take into account the regional religious and economic differences will not be able to reconcile itself with these broad alliances. Without the support of the Sinhala progressives and other non-Sri Lankan Tamil minority groups, Tamils cannot take their struggle forward anymore.

Nirmala: I am rather keen to turn my back on Tamil nationalism. It is counter-productive and destructive to respond to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism using the latter's own logic. We must eject ourselves out of the deadly relationship between these two inimical nationalisms.

While the Tamil people's struggle for their just rights and against the majoritarian state cannot stop, they have to stop thinking Tamil, Tamil, Tamil all the time. They have to be thinking in terms of their rights within the larger framework of minority rights. Also, devolution is about giving power to the local people; it is not just about the Tamil people.

We have to wipe the slate clean and start all over again. This must be done actively, as I do not think that Tamil nationalism with secessionist aspirations, particularly in the diaspora, will die a natural death with the demise of the LTTE.

Even if the LTTE is destroyed as a conventional armed force, it is possible that a new guerrilla war could emerge in a few years' time.

For this very reason, it is our duty to see that a democratic leadership evolves, and an alternative, truly democratic voice for the Tamils emerges.

Courtesy: Himal Southasian, April 2009

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