

# Revival of Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

Recently there was a lot of media hype in Sri Lanka about the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE's) overseas remnants' attempts to reactivate the Tamil insurgent movement in the island. As it invariably happens in Sri Lanka, the reports appear to be a mixture of facts and fiction. Tamil detractors tried to trash the reports, saying they were issued to draw public attention away from the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) March 2014-session in Geneva. There is probably some truth in this; but there is a strong case to suspect that the overseas LTTE had made a bid to revive the movement in Sri Lanka. The LTTE's overseas network had survived the total destruction of the LTTE and its entire leadership, including its founder V Prabhakaran, in May 2009. It has access to the LTTE's large assets stashed abroad, waiting to be tapped. So Sri Lanka's concerns on this count are real; it simply cannot afford to allow the LTTE to stage a comeback on its soil.

## LTTE's Overseas Network

After the war, the LTTE remnants and its supporters abroad took about three years to reorganise themselves. The former militants are now organised into two major groups led by P Sivaparan alias Nediyanan and Vinayagam respectively to carry on the LTTE's militant struggle. According to the Sri Lanka Army, Nediyanan, based in Norway, leads a covert group that has established its cells

in various Western countries. Vinayagam, former LTTE intelligence operative, based in Paris, leads the Headquarter Group. He is aided by the LTTE's underworld members and criminal elements. He is involved in activities like smuggling of people to Canada, taking care of LTTE investments abroad, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Two organisations were formed by LTTE supporters after the LTTE disowned militancy. The aim of the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) led by 'Prime Minister' Rudrakumaran, the LTTE's attorney in the US, is to "democratically" struggle for an independent Tamil Eelam. It has an elected 'Parliament', ministers, etc. Two members have been nominated from Tamil Nadu for the Parliament. The Global Tamil Forum (GTF), led by one-time LTTE acolyte Father Emmanuel, is a vocal and powerful diaspora body enjoying wider support. It purports to work for the Tamils within Sri Lanka's existing political set-up. It has been supporting the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in Sri Lanka and has links with the Tamil Eelam Supporters Organisation (TESO) revived by the DMK party in Tamil Nadu. The British Tamil Forum (BTF), considered more radical than the GTF, parted ways with the latter after a short period of unification.

Internationally, these organisations have been campaigning for President Rajapaksa to be hauled up before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged war crimes and genocide during the Eelam War. Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa probably had these organisations in mind when he drew attention to the LTTE network in a recent interview, and said that it has mounted a sustained international propaganda against Sri Lanka "through front organisations that have put on a democratic face."<sup>2</sup> Though these set-ups have made Sri Lanka nervous, they are far from the highly disciplined and networked organisation that the LTTE had established. Nor do they enjoy wide support among the diaspora.

## **LTTE's Revival Attempts in Sri Lanka**

According to reports based on the Sri Lanka Army sources, overseas LTTE elements made three attempts to establish an LTTE foothold in Sri Lanka between 2012 and 2014.<sup>3</sup> None of the attempts succeeded because Sri Lanka has revamped its security intelligence systems to be ready for such eventualities. The first attempt was discovered in March 2012 while investigating the murder of a cadre of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) [a partner in the

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ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition] in Trincomalee district. It was found that Kumaran of the Vinayagam faction in Paris had recruited 15 former LTTE cadres in Tamil Nadu to infiltrate them into Sri Lanka to revive it. One of these cells, sent to Trincomalee, carried out the killing of the EPDP cadre. The second revival attempt was uncovered in December 2012 when a former LTTE cadre was arrested in Colombo. This revealed that "a clandestine campaign," financed by LTTE overseas elements, was underway in Tamil Nadu to recruit and train Sri Lankan Tamil youths before infiltrating them into Sri Lanka.

The third and latest attempt was discovered in March 2014 during a routine police check up of an LTTE cadre, Gobi, for suspicious conduct in the Kilinochchi area. When he opened fire at the police, the security forces launched a manhunt and killed not only Gobi but two other former LTTE cadres, Theiveegan, and Appan. Further investigations revealed that Theiveegan, a former bodyguard of V Prabhakaran, was in touch with leaders of both the LTTE factions abroad in a bid to revive the Tigers in Sri Lanka. Following this, in March 2014, Sri Lanka banned 16 Tamil diaspora organisations and 424 individuals believed to be "facilitating or participating" in acts of terrorism and ordered the freezing of their funds, assets and economic resources. The list included 32 persons said to be living in Tamil Nadu as well as the DMK-sponsored Tamil Eelam Supporters Organisation (TESO).

## **Paranoia About Tamil Terrorism**

On the flip side, though the LTTE has been wiped out, the Sri Lanka government has been keeping alive the threat of revival of Tamil terrorism to remind the people of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's achievement in ending Prabhakaran's "terror regime." Rajapaksa has already cashed in on his national popularity after the war to get elected a second time as President and to secure an absolute majority in Parliament for his coalition.<sup>4</sup> Using the parliamentary majority, Rajapaksa got the Constitution amended to remove the bar on an incumbent President holding office beyond a second term.<sup>5</sup>

The Rajapaksa family has now established its firm grip on power, with President Rajapaksa's brother Basil as the Economic Development Minister and another brother, Gotabaya, as the Defence Secretary in charge of the armed forces and internal security. The threat of LTTE revival has also enabled the President to justify maintaining the oversized Army of about 200,000 well-trained soldiers.<sup>6</sup> Around 30-35 percent of the Army is based in permanent camps in the Tamil

predominant Northern and Eastern Provinces to discourage any revival of LTTE separatism.

## **An Environment for LTTE Revival**

While the revival of the LTTE in Sri Lanka is possible, the current socio-political environment is not conducive for it. Neither the historical context nor the popular upsurge for an independent Eelam that fostered Tamil militancy in the 1980s exists today. India's forceful support for the Tamil minority has also changed qualitatively. India-Sri Lanka relations have grown manifold and multifaceted now, diminishing the earlier focus on the Tamil issue.

The rise of Tamil insurgency was the logical sequence to the failure of Sri Lanka to satisfy the Tamil's political demand for autonomy in the face of the state's increasing emphasis on Sinhala Buddhist culture and language since 1956. It morphed into a demand for the creation of Tamil Eelam when politicians failed to meet the Tamils' aspirations to preserve their identity, language and traditional areas of habitation. When politicians could not resolve the issue, Tamil extremists took over. The officially sponsored 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo gave credence to Tamil extremism.<sup>7</sup> Indian intervention in its wake resulted in the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in 1987 (ISLA) that led to the introduction of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution to provide limited autonomy to the Tamils.<sup>8</sup> When the LTTE refused to disarm like other militant groups, as required by the ISLA, India got involved in a long drawn war with the LTTE.

India withdrew its forces from Sri Lanka due to political changes in both countries in 1990, giving the LTTE a new lease of life. India has maintained a low profile on the Sri Lanka Tamil issue from then onwards. After Prabhakaran's mindless killing of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, Tamil militants lost India's sympathy forever. So any new attempt to revive the LTTE cannot count on India's support as in 1987. It is also doubtful whether the major Tamil parties would support the LTTE's revival attempts from Tamil Nadu. The fringe parties that support it now are compromised and cannot provide worthwhile assistance except for rabble rousing.

After the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks in the US, the world is more united than ever before in fighting terrorism of all hues. The classical militant movements of the 1960s cannot survive now unless they have political support, both internally and externally. Such support is unlikely to be available any more for the LTTE revival exercise. Internally, the Tamils have been demoralised after the war. They have lost their livelihood, kith and kin and habitations in three decades of militancy,

and are looking for survival strategies rather than a separate homeland. With a huge military presence in their midst, the Tamils would be wary of supporting any militancy for fear of retribution from the state. In this environment, any leader attempting to revive the LTTE will find it extremely difficult to find support among the population.

## **Leadership Requirements**

Prabhakaran's charismatic leadership was responsible for motivating Tamil youths to sacrifice their lives for the cause of separatism. However, the LTTE's rise and fall has shown the need for more than charismatic militant leadership to achieve success against a legitimately organised state. Prabhakaran's failure to achieve his objective despite the advantages of immense power and an excellent overseas support network was due to his faith in military power rather than political parleys. This inability to exploit political opportunities cost him dearly. The most glaring example was his inability to use India's immense goodwill to his advantage after the signing of the ISLA in 1987. His overwhelming desire to emerge as the sole arbiter of the Tamils made him paranoid about Indian intentions. Another instance was his failure to use the goodwill generated after he agreed to cooperate with President Ranasinghe Premadasa to see the Indian troops out of the island in 1990, and turn it into political advantage.

Prabhakaran revelled in the power he had as the LTTE's unchallenged leader, destabilising the Sri Lanka government and sending his opponents cowering in fear. The political assassinations were carried out to satisfy his ego more than to exploit any political opportunity. Often, they were detrimental to the LTTE itself. The LTTE's assassination of Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in 2005 gained nothing more than a ban on the organisation in 32 countries. This practically bottled up the LTTE's global supply network just a year before the war. No less damaging were the wanton killings of A Amirthalingam, a towering Tamil political leader, and the constitutional lawyer Neelam Thiruchelvam. Their loss deprived the LTTE of a valuable political interface that would have come in handy during the peace process in 2002.

This shows that any separatist leader aspiring to revive the LTTE has to have a broader, pragmatic agenda that would leverage all sections of the Tamil population, both at home and overseas. Such a leader is not visible at present on the horizon. Given the difficult environment in Sri Lanka and internationally, it would be an uphill task to motivate the youth for the near impossible task of revival of a separatist struggle of any kind.

## **Conclusion**

Since 1990, despite episodic Eelam wars, most of the Sinhala intelligentsia and politicians have been conscious of the need to resolve the confrontation with the Tamil minority for durable ethnic amity. The wars have proved very costly for Sri Lanka in both human and economic terms. There is widespread support for meeting the reasonable demands of the Tamils through a political process.

However, the President has continued to ignore the core issue of political autonomy for the Tamils, perhaps for political reasons as he does not enjoy Tamil electoral support. He has focussed largely on development of infrastructure and public services in the war affected areas, with commendable results. Even the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) elections were conducted four years after the war, with a lot prodding from India. And the TNA government that came to power has not been given a free hand in exercising even its limited powers. This has only increased suspicion. The military intelligence breathing down the necks of civilians has undermined the trust of the people in Rajapaksa. Though there is discontentment over this among the Tamil population, it has not reached the point of opting for revival of militancy.

Rajapaksa also does not seem to have given up his option to evolve a political equation with the Tamils. He has been harping on the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) which has been boycotted by the opposition parties, including the TNA as the instrument for resolving the Tamil issue. This has only delayed the political process. The TNA-led NPC government has been articulating the Tamil point of view to the global audience. And India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is exerting renewed pressure on Rajapaksa to enforce the 13th Amendment in full as a prelude to kick starting the political reconciliation process. As there is some hope of politically resolving the Tamil issue, the revival of the LTTE will have few takers among the Tamil population. The prolonged war and migration (both internal and external) have depleted the Tamil population, particularly in the Northern Province.<sup>9</sup> The Tamils in these regions have lost two generations of youths who had been the backbone of LTTE insurgency in the war. Thus, the sheer paucity of young people would make the LTTE's revival exercise a difficult one.

**Eelam wars have proved costly for Sri Lanka in both human and economic terms.**

The overseas LTTE does not seem to have the organisational strength to bounce into Sri Lanka as seen by the failure of all the three attempts made so far. But it is unlikely give up attempts to do so in the future. Its overt and covert presence in Tamil Nadu has serious connotations for the national security of both India and Sri Lanka, and their cordial relations. There is a tendency to overestimate the political hype about the overwhelming support the Sri Lanka Tamils seem to enjoy. There is widespread sympathy for their plight and political parties are competing with one another to cash in on this. However, despite the fiery statements from fringe elements, the political parties will have serious reservations about the state becoming a springboard for Tamil extremism. The state government has been cooperating with the Centre and the Tamil Nadu police has been rounding up Sri Lankan extremist elements whenever information is provided. This would show that the LTTE overseas elements will find it difficult to get tangible results from political support in the state. However, the security implications of the LTTE networking in Tamil Nadu cannot be underestimated, and both the Centre and the state need to be vigilant at all times.

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## Notes

1. Udeshi Amarasinghe, "Modus Operandi: Tamil Diaspora and LTTE Organisation" June 05, 2014. [www.defence.lk](http://www.defence.lk) This account, based on Sri Lanka intelligence sources, may not be wholly accurate; but it broadly conforms to the emerging LTTE support groups abroad.
2. "Lanka Says LTTE Network is Intact," *Colombo Gazette*, April 16, 2014. In the interview, he estimated the scale of funds mobilised by the LTTE as between US \$ 50 to 70 million on an annual basis from 1993 to 2002, and \$ 200 million per annum from 2002 to 2008. [www.colombogazette.com](http://www.colombogazette.com)
3. DBS Jeyaraj, "Anatomy of An Aborted Attempt to Revive the LTTE in Sri Lanka," May 22, 2014, <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/29849>
4. The UPFA secured an absolute majority in the 225-member House winning 144 seats, an increase of 39 since the 2004 election. The main opposition United National Front (UNP) won only 60 seats – 22 less than their earlier score. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/8634008.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8634008.stm)
5. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution passed on September 08, 2010, removed the sentence that mentioned the limit of the reelection of the President and proposed appointment of a parliamentary council to decide the appointment of independent posts like commissioners of elections and human rights and Supreme Court judges. This removed the provisions of the 17th Amendment (passed on October 03, 2001) for creation of the Constitutional Council and independent commissions in which the opposition had

- nominees, thereby increasing the powers of the President. See <http://www.priu.gov.lk/Cons/1978Constitution/Introduction.htm>
6. The Sri Lankan Army Chief Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya had told the *Sunday Observer* (dated July 25, 2010) that the Army strength was frozen at 203,000 soldiers. See "SLA's 200,000 Men Could Face Any Threat – Army Chief," [www.sundayobserver.lk](http://www.sundayobserver.lk) However, since then, there had been some attrition in the strength. According to the online portal [www.globalfirepower.com](http://www.globalfirepower.com), the Army's strength (as per update as on March 27, 2014) is estimated at 161,000 active frontline personnel and 98,200 active reservists. This is probably correct. [http://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country\\_id=sri-lanka](http://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=sri-lanka)
  7. On July 23, 1983, the LTTE ambushed a military convoy in the outskirts of Jaffna town the killing 13 soldiers. This triggered politically motivated ethnic riots in Colombo which spread to other cities in which Sinhalese mobs carried out a pogrom against the Tamil population, pillaging, looting, killing and destroying their property. When thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils sought refuge in Tamil Nadu to escape the violence, it created a spontaneous upsurge of public outrage and sympathy in India for the Tamil cause. The events in Sri Lanka created such terror that over the years 700,000 Tamils are estimated to have emigrated to other countries.
  8. R Hariharan, "The Discarded Accord and the Unwanted War," *The Hindu*, August 07, 2007. <http://www.thehindu.com>
  9. According to the 2012 census, there were 2,270,924 Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka, 11.21 percent (as against 12.7 percent as per 1981 census) out of the total of 20,277,594. They constitute over 93 percent of the population in the Northern Province and are the largest ethnic group with over 39 percent in the Eastern Province. Seventy percent of Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka live in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. [http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/sm/CPH%202011\\_R1.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/sm/CPH%202011_R1.pdf)