

FROM ARMS TO POLITICS: THE NEW STRUGGLE OF THE TAMIL DIASPORA



Tamil protesters block the Gardiner Expressway, May 10, 2009, Toronto © Marc Blinch / Reuters

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During the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil diaspora played a key role providing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with the funds necessary to conduct the armed struggle. In 2009, the Tamil guerrilla army was annihilated. The diaspora then took over the struggle for the “Tamil cause”, fighting the Sri Lankan government on the international arena through non-violent political means. This paper deals with the evolutions of Tamil diaspora politics since the end of the war. Its aim is to understand the scope for action of the diaspora while all forms of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka have been crushed, to see how the strategies and agenda of diasporic organizations are affected by the post-conflict context and to expose the ensuing relationships between the diaspora and Tamil political parties in Sri Lanka.

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As the 34th session of the UN Human Rights Council is approaching, Tamil political activists from all parts of the world are getting ready for what has now become a traditional meeting for the diaspora. Since the end of the Sri Lankan war in 2009,¹ the struggle for the Tamil cause has shifted from the battlefields of the Jaffna peninsula to the corridors of the Palace of Nations in Geneva. In this process, the role of the diaspora has been radically transformed.

The Tamil refugees who fled Sri Lanka since the early 1980s, constituting a large diaspora of about a million people in India, Europe, Canada and Australia, played a key role in the war. After losing the support of India further to the assassination of the Indian prime minister by the LTTE in 1991, the Tigers heavily relied on the diaspora to finance the war. By means of an international political structure designed to supervise the community and to collect funds, Tamil expatriates were massively mobilized for the war effort. Their contributions proved decisive in the successes and resilience of the insurgency. But the diaspora had an auxiliary role only, consisting in providing financial support to the LTTE, with no decision-making power whatsoever. The decision centre was the LTTE leadership in Sri Lanka, and dissenting voices on the island and abroad were silenced.²

It was with considerable dismay that in 2009, Tamil overseas watched on their TV screen the debacle of the mighty LTTE and the bombing of civilians by the Sri Lankan government. For two consecutive months, they gathered by the tens of thousands everywhere in the diaspora to enjoin their host-governments to stop the massacres.³ Many would for long refuse to believe that the invinci-

1. The war lasted from 1983 to May 2009. It opposed the LTTE, a Tamil guerrilla group fighting for the creation of a separate state, Tamil Eelam, to the Sri Lankan government, supported by the Sinhalese majority. Most of the fighting took place in the Northern parts of the country, the Jaffna peninsula, that were under control of the LTTE for a large part of the war.

2. Gaëlle Déquirez. *Nationalisme à longue distance et mobilisations politiques en diaspora. Le mouvement séparatiste tamoul sri lankais en France (1980-2009)*. Thèse: sciences politiques, Université de Lille II : 2011.

3. In London, more than 100 000 people – about half of the Tamil population in the UK – gathered on April 11th according to the police, and Tamil protesters blocked the main highway to downtown Toronto for a full day on May 10th. See BBC “Thousands on Tamil pro-

ble leader Prabhakaran, founder and chief of the LTTE, was dead and that the war was lost. But past the initial shock, the diaspora soon reorganized to carry on a new struggle, this time unarmed, on the international arena.

This paper deals with the reconfiguration of Tamil diaspora politics since the end of the war.⁴ Its aim is to explain the scope for action of the diaspora in the context of a “victors’ peace,” where the terms of the peace-settlement are shaped by the victor only, the way diasporic mobilization and strategies are affected by the new context in Sri Lanka and the ensuing relationships between the diaspora and Tamil political parties in Sri Lanka.

DIASPORIC POST-WAR ACTIVISM: LOBBYING THE “INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY”

The 2009 protests marked the beginning of a new model of mobilization for the Tamil diaspora. Since then, its goal is to continue the separatist struggle through peaceful political means, carrying an international advocacy campaign directed at “the international community.” The idea embraced by members of diaspora organizations is that after the defeat of the armed struggle at home, the responsibility to defend Tamil interests and aspirations now rests upon the diaspora.

Since 2009, Tamil political organizations in the diaspora in Western countries have been lobbying state authorities, political parties or local representatives as well as international organizations to make them pressure the Sri Lankan government into implementing measures favourable to the Tamil population. Their claims pertain to accountability for the war crimes committed by the government but not only. They also call an improvement of the current situation. Indeed, the grievances that were at the roots of the insurrection have not been addressed

test march”, BBC April 11, 2009. Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hij/uk/7994946.stm> (consulted 05/15/2017); and The Star “Tamil protest moves off Gardiner to Queen’s Park”, The Star April 10, 2009. Online: https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2009/05/10/tamil_protest_moves_off_gardiner_to_queens_park.html (consulted 05/15/2017)

4. The empirical data analysed here was collected in semi-structured interviews carried out with members of diasporic organizations in London and Paris and with politicians and activists in Sri Lanka, from 2015 to 2016. Online Tamil media sources were also used.

since 2009, on the contrary. The triumphalist Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism embraced by the victorious Sri Lankan government has been going hand in hand with large scale human rights violations against Tamil populations and with a denial of their political rights.⁵ In that context, diaspora organizations also call for the establishment of a political solution and the end to current abuses.

The actions of these organizations can take the form of direct lobbying, awareness campaigns or public protests for occasions such as the anniversary of the 2009 massacres, the sessions of the Human Rights Council in Geneva or the visit of a Sri Lankan political leader. As indicated by several Tamil lobbyists, Tamil activism has evolved from primarily based on large public protests right after the war to a more professional lobbying conducted by only a few activists, as a result of stronger links built with Western decision-makers.

Where the Tamil population constitutes a large part of the electorate, in certain constituencies of London, Paris or Toronto for instance, local Western politicians tend to make strong statements in favour of the Tamil cause, including the Tamils’ right to self-determination.⁶ Such supports are also visible at the national level, especially in election times, since Tamil organizations try to channel the vote of the community towards the candidates that support Tamil claims most clearly.

THE POST-2009 DIASPORA: A FRAGMENTED POLITICAL SPHERE

During the war, the LTTE branch abroad worked as an overarching system supervising most of the political and social activities of the diaspora, including fundraising for the armed struggle, sending of remittances and invest-

5. Seven years after the end of the war, Tamil areas in Sri Lanka have one of the highest rates of militarization in the world, and the army is largely engaged in civilian economic activities, with severe consequences for the local economy. Many lands are still occupied by the military or used for the establishment of Sinhalese settlements, while displaced people have not been resettled. Disappearances, torture and intimidation of people expressing criticisms have been common practices.

6. For instance, in December 2017, the mayor of the French municipality of Le Blanc Mesnil kindly made a room in the town hall available for the annual meeting of the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, an international Tamil diaspora organization. In his welcome speech, he wished them to be able one day to rule their own country.

ments for development, aid to asylum seekers as well as cultural and commemorative activities. At the top of this structure was the International LTTE Secretariat, based in various European countries over time. This unitary system disappeared with the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, to be replaced by a myriad of organizations, with their specific tasks and strategies, competing for the support of the diaspora.⁷

The remnants of the LTTE international structures still exist across the diaspora. Usually called Tamil Coordination Committees (TCCs), like during the war, these groups operate in all settlement countries of the diaspora. Many of their members already belonged to the structure during the war. The TCCs still regulate an important part of diaspora's social life, running a number of language and dance schools, youth organizations, temples etc., especially in non-English speaking countries. They mostly engage in intra-community activities aiming at preserving the memory of the struggle and the cohesion of the community. They are for instance in charge of commemorative events such as the Great Heroes Day (Maaveerar Naal), where thousands of Tamil expatriates come each year to mourn their martyrs. As a result, they are probably the group with the largest popular base in the diaspora. On the political side, members of TCCs usually do not engage in direct lobbying but they mobilize the community for public protests.

In parallel to the TCCs, a number of national organizations dedicated to direct lobbying only have emerged since 2009. Among these are the British Tamils Forum (BTF), Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), Australian Tamil Congress (ATC), United States Tamil Political Action Council (USTPAC), Maison du Tamil Eelam in France, to name a few. Most of these groups were initially related to the TCCs, some working as their lobbying branch or their public face in countries where TCC is banned as a terrorist group. But a number of them gradually distanced themselves from the TCCs due to diverging strategies, as we will see.

The fragmentation of the diaspora has been a source of concern for many activists abroad, and as soon as the war was over, initiatives were taken to unite all Tamil political forces abroad. But none of the structures created managed to impose itself as the voice of the diaspora. In 2009, the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) was set up to bring together all

7. Most of the political organizations that constitute the post-2009 diasporic political sphere focus on advocacy and sometimes memorialization. Development initiatives in Sri Lanka and aid to Tamil refugees is largely left to small charities.

the aforementioned national lobbying groups under one international umbrella organization. But in 2013, half of the member organizations – the ones closer to the TCC and its views – left, and the leadership of the GTF today works as yet another independent organization.

The other international initiative taken in 2009 was the creation of the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), a democratically elected government of the diaspora, with a parliament, a senate and a constitution. But the structure, the first of its kind, failed to meet its ambitious aspirations to represent the whole diaspora. This was partly due to rivalries between two former LTTE factions. The TGTE was created by Tharmalingam Shanmugam Kumaran, alias KP, who became the head of the International LTTE Secretariat in 2009, after the death of his predecessor, Castro.⁸ Many members of the TCCs supporting Castro were hostile to the TGTE that KP was supposed to lead.⁹ Their reaction to it was two-fold. On the one hand, they created the GTF to counter it. On the other hand, they decided to be part of the TGTE and won seats in the 2010 elections, but they soon left the organization to stand in opposition.¹⁰ In the end, the TGTE just became one of the many organizations making up the post-2009 diasporic political sphere.

The divisions between these different political groups are not only due to rivalries between former sections of the LTTE. There are also generational and ideological elements. While members of the TCCs are typically first generation immigrants mainly socializing with their community, the new lobbying organizations are usually run by well integrated individuals, and in certain cases, by young second generation immigrants who became activists only after the war. These groups do not always have the same views on the goals to pursue and the strategies to adopt. With the defeat of the LTTE came a liberation of speech that made room for all these different views. But activists and organizations face contradictory pressures from the diasporic community and their Western interlocutors that affect their position.

8. KP was already exercising this function until 2003, when he was replaced by Castro. The latter side-lined the existing local diaspora leaders loyal to KP and established his own network. KP regained his oversea position in 2009, but most TCC leaders rejected his leadership.

9. Arrested and imprisoned in Sri Lanka in August 2009, KP could not become the leader of the TGTE. He nominated the former legal advisor of the LTTE to replace him.

10. Amarnath Amarasingham "A History of Tamil Diaspora Politics in Canada: Organisational Dynamics and Negotiated Order, 1978-2013." International Centre for Ethnic Studies. 2013 N° 11

THE DIASPORA'S DILEMMA: CONFRONTATION OR RECONCILIATION?

Since the defeat of the LTTE, it has become easier for Tamil activists to seek support for their cause from external actors. But in spite of this, the alignment of Tamil and Western views on the Sri Lankan crisis is still limited, and diasporic organizations thus face a dilemma between seeking internal or external approval.

The separatist ideology developed by the LTTE, according to which the Tamil nation can only achieve justice and peace through independence, is still very present in the diaspora. The perspective of an independent Tamil homeland plays a key role in defining Tamil identity abroad. Dropping separatist claims therefore strongly undermines the organizations' popularity.¹¹ The glorification of the LTTE leader and the martyrs prevailing in most diaspora circles also incite activists to emphasize their previous links with the LTTE as elements of legitimization and to refrain from publicly criticizing them.¹²

The risk of alienating the community is exacerbated by the denunciation campaigns conducted by pro-LTTE units like the TCCs against organizations departing from the traditional stance. For example, the Tamil Youth Organization (TYO) and the National Council of Canadian Tamils (NCCT)¹³ issued a joint statement in 2012 declaring: "We will boycott any Tamil Diaspora organization that compromises the principles of Homeland, Nation and Self-Determination, and therefore lends legitimacy to the unitary state of Sri Lanka."¹⁴ This kind of "name and shame" was common practice for the LTTE, who labelled some of their opponents as traitors. In the words of an activist, today, these groups have a role of "guardians of Tamil nationalism, maintaining a balance, making sure the organizations

11. In the words of a member of Tamil Solidarity, "if you say that you're against Tamil Eelam, as an organization, well you're out, completely." Interview conducted in London, 27/09/2016.

12. Paradoxically, this process of legitimization does not apply to former LTTE combatants who left Sri Lanka after the war. They are treated with hostility by long-established diaspora activists. In London and Paris, they even organize their own parallel commemoration ceremonies.

13. The NCCT is the Canadian equivalent to TCC elsewhere.

14. Tamilnet "Second generation Eezham Tamils in Canada assert Tamil sovereignty at Youth Conference," Tamilnet, February 27, 2012. Online: <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=34924> (consulted 02/06/2017)

do not abandon some core principles."¹⁵

But these internal pressures are in direct contradiction with the views of those to whom the advocacy is directed. Indeed, Western policy-makers still consider the LTTE as a terrorist organization and defend a model of "liberal peace" that endorses reconciliation and firmly rejects separatist claims. As a result, heated debates have taken place within organizations about the extent of the concessions that should be made, in particular regarding the issue of a separate state. The use of the LTTE flag in public events also sparked a controversy. Some diaspora leaders have argued that raising the flag alienates external support, but a majority refuses to ban the only symbol the Tamil people can identify with. The CTC and GTF are the two major organizations that have gradually departed from the LTTE traditional stance. This was the reason for the secession of many member organizations from the GTF. Pro-independence groups celebrating the LTTE, which are still the majority, have a much broader support among the diaspora than the few organizations that publicly criticize the Tigers and advocate for reconciliation. But the latter receive much more attention from Western policy-makers than the former, which are labelled extremists.

Beyond popular attachment to Tamil Eelam and internal pressures to conform with the traditional LTTE stance, the refusal of many activists to seek reconciliation with the Sri Lankan government is also due to the unlikely success of such a strategy. External actors have continuously asked diaspora organizations to collaborate with the Sri Lankan authorities, but the attitude of the latter makes it difficult. After its victory, the Sri Lankan regime identified the diaspora as the new existential threat the country faced. Most diaspora organizations were labelled as terrorist groups in 2014. This propaganda has served as a justification for maintaining abusive anti-terror laws in the island. In addition, the conciliatory approach adopted by a few diaspora organizations and by the major Tamil political forces in Sri Lanka has not borne fruit so far, since the government has been repeatedly opting out of negotiations or breaking its commitments. The new president elected in 2015, Maithripala Sirisena, seems more willing to address certain Tamil claims, but no concrete measures have yet been taken, and massive opposition from Buddhist nationalist forces makes any significant progress doubtful. In this context, according to many diaspora activists, entering negotiations would only be playing into the hands of the government, giving the impression that the crisis is being resolved and therefore drawing away the attention of the international community.

15. Interview with a member of the Tamil Guardian in London, 03/29/2017

DIASPORA AND TAMIL POLITICAL PARTIES IN SRI LANKA: ALLIES OR RIVALS?

The nationalist conflictual approach of most diaspora organisations differs from the line adopted by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition bringing together most of the Tamil political parties that succeeded the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Swapping its former separatist claims for a federalist agenda, the TNA has adopted a strategy of cooperation with the government, hoping to obtain gradual concessions. Since 2009, the TNA has made symbolic gestures of good will, such as refusing to go to Geneva in 2012 to push for a UN resolution against Sri Lanka, or waving the Sri Lankan flag, considered by many Tamils as a symbol of Sinhalese domination, in national events. In 2015, the TNA supported the opposition candidate Sirisena and successfully urged the Tamil population to vote for him. While officially the leading force of the opposition since then, it actually backs the government against its real rivals, who come from the ranks of Sirisena's own party.

The TNA's collaborative strategy attracted harsh criticisms from the diaspora. TNA leaders are regularly portrayed in diasporic media as traitors co-opted by the Sri Lankan government,¹⁶ and some demonstrations have been organized to protest against the most conciliatory steps taken by the TNA.¹⁷ Groups like the TGTE view diasporic organizations as the true spokesmen of the Tamil population of Sri Lanka, and Tamil parties as powerless peons, because the diaspora alone has the freedom of expression necessary to defend Tamil aspirations.¹⁸

However, the opposition between the diaspora and Tamil parties in the island should not be overstated. Indeed, the accommodative attitude of TNA leaders coexists with a nationalist rhetoric, especially used during elec-

tions, which receives the approval of diaspora nationalist groups. In addition, the TNA coalition faces important – and increasing – internal divisions, with several members leaning towards a harder line. A prime example is C. V. Wigneswaran, the Chief Minister of the Northern Provincial Council since 2013. While belonging to the TNA, he made a number of bold statements against the regime¹⁹ and thinly veiled criticisms of the TNA leadership. He recently joined hands with the Tamil National Political Front (TNPF), a small rival party promoting confrontation with the government, to create the Tamil Provincial Council (TPC), a non-electoral political body designed to put pressure on the government and the TNA. In 2016 and 2017, the TPC organized protests of an unprecedented scale in Tamil regions. This relative revival of contentious politics was enabled by a relaxing of surveillance and repression under Sirisena. These local hard-line forces are actively wooed by nationalist diaspora groups like the TCC. The TNPF, for instance, received significant funds from abroad for its electoral campaign in 2015,²⁰ and Wigneswaran makes frequent visits overseas. But stronger links with the diaspora are not without risk for these actors, as they are pinpointed by the government to further discredit them as pro-LTTE extremists. Wigneswaran for instance recently asked the Tiger flag to be removed from a TCC meeting he attended in order to avoid problems back home. In parallel to this re-alignment of local and diasporic hard-line nationalist forces, some organizations, like the GTF and the CTC, now fully support the TNA leadership's efforts in favour of reconciliation.

In Sri Lanka, even though the TNA leadership is subject to continuous criticisms due to the absence of concrete outcomes from its line of action, the Tamil population has endorsed the coalition in every election so far, for fear of division. Whether this will change or whether pro-confrontation forces will gain ground in Sri Lanka largely depends on the results of the current talks over the writing of a new constitution, which raises high expectations among Tamils. Depending on the success or failure of the negotiations, diaspora and local actors could find themselves on the same page again, supporting either cooperation with the government or confrontation.

16. Tamilnet "Sampanthan, Sumanthiran exploit ITAK to deviate from Tamil cause: Prof. Sitrampalam." Tamilnet, February 6, 2015. Online: <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=37629> (consulted 02/06/2017)

17. D.B.S. Jeyaraj (2015) "Tamil 'Extremists' Target Sampanthan and Sumanthiran of the TNA as 'Traitors'." March 8. Online: <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/39005> (consulted 02/06/2017)

18. The TGTE refers in particular to the 6th Amendment to the constitution that condemns anyone defending separatism, forcing Tamil forces on the ground to accept the framework of a unitary state.

19. A prime example would be the resolution passed by the Northern Provincial Council requesting the UN to investigate the claim of genocide of the Tamil people, a term that was until then carefully avoided by TNA leaders.

20. Interview with the leader of the TNPF, in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, 01/17/2017