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## Sri Lanka: Prioritising reasons for LTTE's defeat

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It is natural that many reasons are ascribed for the defeat of the LTTE; none is exclusively true, they are interconnected, some more significant than others. After five years it is timely to sift the wheat from the chaff and reflect upon their relative importance and gain some perspective.

Most oft proclaimed in Sinhalese society is that a determination of leadership (funding, unflagging political support, military strategy, and resisting foreign pressure to compromise) decided the issue; yes this is partly true. A second argument, popular with Tamil liberals, is that the LTTE lost the moral high ground by espousing terrorism against Sinhalese civilians and Tamil leaders, and that internally it sank to the pits of internecine cannibalism; again partly true.

A third theory loved by armchair historians is that the war was intrinsically unwinnable; 13% Tamils versus 75% Sinhalese; a non-state actor versus state power. Yes, but the world has also seen some counter examples. A fourth explanation advanced by Tamils with empathy for the LTTE is that it was let down by India and the international community (IC). The US and India even provided Colombo with military intelligence they moan. This is an aspect of a bigger international story that I will discuss. Finally a fifth proposition, which I place the most weight on, is that the LTTE was politically misbegotten; all the other negatives flowed from this congenital malfunction. None of this is new, but what about ranking these factors, bearing in mind their interconnectedness?

There are trivial 'explanations' too; Mahinda Rajapakse's astrological conjunctions, Karunanidhi's double dealing, diaspora infighting, treachery of the old-left, and the implacable resolve of Sinhala chauvinism. All this can be put to one side as 'also' factors – soothsaying of course is hilarious hogwash. This essay makes no further reference to these secondary factors.

### **Downgrading the first factor**

Determination of leadership: Yes credit has to be given to President Mahinda, Defence Secretary Gotabaya and Army Commander Sarath Fonseka whether one is a supporter or foe of the trio (one can dislike Attila the Hun without denying his skills). That they were determined to finish off the LTTE is undeniable. After the Mawilaru incident, sensing the LTTE's international isolation, they knew the wind was blowing their way and poured money into the endeavour, expanded the military, employed extensive air power, resisted international pressure, and ignored civilian casualties once they smelt victory. The fact is that the Sinhala State did not intentionally kill Tamil civilians, rather it was callous; what Hannah Arndt called the 'banality of evil'. It did not hesitate to decimate civilians if one Tiger was shielded among them. This is unsurprising since the military had been weaned in 1989-90 on the blood of southern Sinhala youth. To make an aside comment: For this reason the UNHRC investigations should pursue crimes against humanity and war crimes; genocide won't stick since the intention to destroy a race or group must be proved to establish genocide.

The factor I named first, determination of leadership, was important but not the decisive or the second most important factor in defeating the LTTE. Previously there were two determined politico-military efforts that came to nought. The JR-Lalith, Vadamarachchi offensive in 1987 came close to victory when it had to be aborted. The Chandrika-Anurudha effort in late 1990s and early 2000s to regain the initiative after setbacks to Aghni Kheela and the devastating defeat at Elephant Pass in April 2000 was also resolute. Janaka Perera succeeded in repulsing a do-or-die effort by the LTTE to retake Jaffna. No one can say Chandrika, incensed by endless LTTE perfidy in negotiations in the mid-1990s, did not subsequently provide the military with ample support.

JR in 1987, and Chandrika in the late 1990s, were unsuccessful not for lack of determination, but because other factors went against them. Indian intervention and the failure to split the LTTE, respectively, went against them. True, JR was a dolt to provoke Indira Gandhi, the power next door, into arming and training Tamil militants, but eventually in 1987 he had no choice but to capitulate. He had to call off the operation in Vadamarachchi or have his military bombed into oblivion and his ports blockaded. He had no choice.

The Chandrika of the late 1990s and early 2000s was not lacking in resolve, having tasted LTTE treachery. Her problem was that her army, despite its best efforts, lost. The LTTE stayed unified and retained indulgence in the international community and support among Tamils at home and abroad. Though there was no question of gaining *Thamil Eelam*, and never any prospect of the LTTE occupying Colombo and taking state power, the armed forces nevertheless were incapable of defeating it prior to the LTTE's self-inflicted split in the Eastern Province. It was not lack of leadership in government; it was other factors that aborted victory. Ten years later, the short-sightedness of the LTTE leadership in failing to avert an internal split, sealed its fate.

## Disposing of theories two and three

Second in my list was the theory that the LTTE was defeated because it degenerated into terrorism and lost the moral high ground. The third thesis was that *Thamil Eelam* was an illusion that could never be achieved. There is some truth in both. It is true that at first Tamil militants (not only the LTTE) were exemplary while the state resorted to retributive massacre of civilians, rape, arson and racial hatred. But somewhere along the line, after the LTTE cannibalised other Tamil militants, things changed. Terrorism surfaced on a big scale in 1987 in the Habarana and Pettah bus-stand bombing in each of which over a 100 civilians died, followed by the coldblooded murder of 600 captured policemen in 1990. Something flipped; the LTTE knitted liberation war with terror against civilians. A dastardly act of different genre was the expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in 1991.

These atrocities were compounded by political murders; Amirthalingam-1989, Athulathmudali- 1993, Premadasa-1993, Gamini Dissanayake-1994, and Neelan Thiruchelvam-1999. The NSSP's Annamali was also killed by the LTTE. Proof of loss of rationality is that after 9-11 it persisted in terrorism, unaware that the world had changed. It was digging its own grave. In each of 2006, 2007 and 2008, there were about 15 attacks against civilians none of which can be passed off as war against a military foe. It is a measure of megalomania, divorced from reality that even after 9-11 Prabaharan persisted in individual terrorism; Lakshman Kadirgama in 2005, Janaka Perera in 2008, Jeyaraj Fernandopullai in 2008 and dozens others depending on who you believe. All this contributed to its eventual international isolation whose crucial importance I will discuss later.

The LTTE used terror but no doubt the Lankan military was a worse agent of state terror, including rape which was not in the LTTE's repertoire. People in all lands know the state to be an obnoxious violator of rights and an oppressor of the people; but liberators are expected to be different. Another factor that cost the LTTE the moral high ground was that Tamils in the north and east came to dread it as an abductor of youth. Thousands of young Tamils living abroad today, many of them vociferous LTTE supporters, paradoxically, are refugees from this conscription.

All this is true and flow from the quintessential militarism of the LTTE; but terrorism and loss of the moral high ground was not the direct reason for defeat. Ruthless organisations have been victors if people's faith in the cause and international support remained steadfast. A clear case that comes to mind is the creation of Israel. In real world politics the good do not always win, sometimes movements that use terrorism do. Therefore the second factor in my list, the LTTE's propensity to terrorism to match the state terrorism of the armed forces, has to be given reduced priority in the list of reasons contributing directly to the LTTE's defeat.

The third item in my list was that *Thamil Eelam* was intrinsically delusory. The Ceylon Tamils were say, 13% of the population while the Sinhalese 75%. Tamils were alienated from state power and the LTTE was an actor in the jungle. Lanka is an island and partition would entail a long and fractious border - they are still fighting on the Indo-Pakistan border 65 years after partition. Therefore a good case can be

made that the LTTE dream of a separate state was never doable. There is merit in this thesis, but problematic and contentious states do come into existence if other factors are right. Examples include the de facto and much contested partition of the small island of Cyprus, the small territory of Kosovo, tiny Moldova, and possibly future East Ukraine. Therefore I do not believe that the third item on my list was an insuperable obstacle to the LTTE project.

### **Theory four**

I now turn to the last part of my essay to commemorate the fifth year after the end of the war. I am seeking to prioritise the reasons why the LTTE was vanquished and I am well aware that ranking will be controversial – but the truth must prevail! So far I have dealt with three factors (government determination, LTTE terrorism, impossibility of Eelam) which I rank as lower in importance than the two factors that I turn to. In runner-up position I place the hostility of the International Community, especially Delhi, US and UK, and award first place to a birth defect in the LTTE's DNA, the flawed ideological substances on which it was conceived and suckled.

In my mind the international factor, especially the near abroad, is crucial for a small island remote from everywhere else. Events in the Ukraine again prove this thesis; the great power next door will call the shots. Crimea is gone forever; Russia will decide the fate of eastern Ukraine; Obama, Angel Merkel and NATO can gasp but no matter they are extras sitting on the bench; in cricket such guys are called twelfth-man. Either the poltroons in Kiev will negotiate with the rebel provinces and allow them considerable autonomy, say federalism, or that part of Ukraine will secede as a separate state, or secede and integrate with Russia. That's the bottom line. It's not so simple in Lanka, but in the long run it is devolution or death for this island state.

In the Twenty-First Century international factors are crucial; the near-abroad if it is a great or a regional power is decisive. The Rajapakse clan is too dumb to see this; so this maxim will have to be engraved on its gravestone as an epitaph. *Thamil Eelam* died with Rajiv Gandhi because the LTTE morons failed to comprehend the importance of India. Three entities died that day; Rajiv, Prabharan and *Thamil Eelam*. Did a stout, squat, ogre, hiding in a cave in a remote island, fancy that he could murder a past and future prime minister of India and get away with it? Crazy!

Had the LTTE swum with the tide and formed a North-Eastern provincial administration, after the Thirteenth Amendment, as a stable autonomous unit with international guarantees, the history of Lanka would have been happier and the Tamils spared much suffering. This is another colossal Prabaharan blunder on par with his murder of Rajiv Gandhi

Without Indian support and ostracised and banned all over the Western world, the LTTE was isolated and destined to defeat. Oh yes KP could raise millions in the diaspora, the LTTE had shipping lines and access to drug money, but can this match international state power? No, the LTTE was doomed the day it lost international empathy. Its international pariah status sealed its fate. The Rajapakse regime is now staring into the same abyss.

In modern times, from the late Twentieth Century, new states are formed, or regions secede, only exceptionally because they are ethnically, linguistically or culturally homogeneous. The Leninist Right of Homogeneous Nations to Self-Determination thesis is declining in significance and being replaced by the Right of Plural Communities of People to determine their fate. Seceding or not seceding in modern times has more to do with modern realities; global economics, technology and trade, great-power impact and internal democracy - in addition to homogeneity. The fifteen states that emerged out of the USSR, the seven ex-Yugoslav states, most new African ones, and now eastern Ukraine are non-homogeneous. They are not examples of the right of homogeneous Nations to self-determination, as if still living in a bygone era; on the contrary, they exemplify the right of People in plural societies to self-determination in the modern context.

Hence, expulsion of the Muslims from Jaffna in 1991, seeking to create Tamil homogeneity, apart from being a crime in itself, was also an anachronism that showed that the LTTE failed to grasp the plural character of modern states.

### **The final answer**

The most important reason why the LTTE perished was its fallacious prioritisation of the military aspect over the political aspect. Its petty-bourgeois, non-Marxist DNA was military not political. I am not repudiating the armed struggle in so far as it is ancillary, but I am rejecting the strategy of giving it priority over politics. As a result the LTTE became an army, a military entity, not a political entity; this was its core DNA. It is true that in those dark and desperate days of brutal oppression by the state, the LTTE stood up and fought for the Tamil people. This is why most Tamils had a soft corner for the 'boys', even if they suspected that it would all end in tears. Be that as it may, Prabhakaran was not a Lenin, a Mao or a Mandela; he was a Shining Path guerrilla.

The LTTE, the advocate of a military solution rather than a political strategy with a strictly limited military component, perished in a blind alley. To be literal, it perished in a remote lagoon. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, bad faith and deceit in negotiations, and irresponsible terrorism are the hallmarks of a leader unable to digest the 'overdetermining' importance of the political aspect. It is the insignia of an army, intent on victory in the field, not a cachet of statesmanship. The LTTE lived and died in this surreal world. I have held this view for thirty-five years from my *Vama Samasamaja* (LSSP left tendency) days of the 1970s and 1980s, in my 1989 book coedited with Silan Kadirgamar (*Ethnicity*, Arena Publications), and in all my subsequent interventions.

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