

The 'Tigers': A Weak Defence

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The Tigers have posed as the saviour-leaders of the Tamils for more than a decade. In doing so, they have succeeded in dominating Tamil politics and positioning themselves at the centre of Sri Lankan politics. While the Tiger ability to secure power through coercion has played a critical role in their political success, they have also been bolstered by a series of myths and arguments. The myths have ranged from the ridiculous "only Prabakaran knows the answer" - to the fantastic - "thousands of Tamil youth are flocking to join the Tigers." The Tiger myths are both easier and harder to counter than pro-Tiger arguments. They are easier to counter because as myths they are sustained by blind faith rather than reason and have no basis in reality. But this also makes them harder to counter because Tigerists who adhere to these myths are not open to reason. Despite their importance, this paper does not address the Tiger myths. Instead, it focusses on three important pro-Tiger arguments that recur in any discussion about the Tigers.

The first is that the Tigers are the sole representatives of the Tamil people. This argument is usually made by Tigerists (Tamil ultra-nationalists) and is easily countered, whereupon the second defence of the Tigers is invoked. This views their brutality as a response to an uncompromising and unchanging Sinhala nationalism. Ironically, this second pro-Tiger argument is also a critique. Because laying the blame for Tiger excesses on Sinhala nationalism, is also an implicit acknowledgement of Tiger brutality. But there is a much deeper critique of the Tigers, which sees their brutality as the consequence of an attempt to create a new Tamil identity, devoid of freedom and diversity. The final defence of the Tigers, which is shared even by Tamils (whether leftists, liberals or nationalists) who are critical of the Tigers, sees the Tigers, despite their viciousness, as the last defence against the outright destruction of the Tamil people.

This pro-Tiger argument claims that, given the absence of an alternative, a political defeat of the Tigers could jeopardise the possibility of Tamils achieving their rights and may even lead to the complete defeat of the Tamil struggle. This fear is reasonable and deserves careful consideration because it captures the sentiments of Tamil nationalists who are critical of the Tigers, and many secular democratic Sri Lankans, who support the Tamil struggle. However, a nascent alternative does exist. And instead of bemoaning the supposed

absence of one, Tamils (leftists, liberals and nationalists) should help strengthen it.

The sole representative

The Tigers claim to be the sole representatives of the Tamil people. This claim is apparent from any brief examination of Tiger negotiating tactics at peace talks during the last five years. Except for the Thimpu talks, when the Tigers participated along with the other Tamil political parties and organisations, they have always resented the participation of non-Tiger Tamil parties. For example, subsequent to the Indo-Lanka Agreement, a crucial point of disagreement between the Indian government and the Tigers was the Tiger desire to have absolute (not just majority) control of the interim council in the Northeast. What is the moral and political basis for this position taken by the Tigers?

Morally, the claim to sole representative status is difficult to sustain for any organisation. The notion that one group or organisation can represent the interests of a diverse community usually fails to stand up to scrutiny from the basic perspective of individual rights and political freedoms. Undoubtedly, ties of ethnicity, class or gender may serve as a basis for unity against a common oppression. But this is a basis for negative unity and does not instantly translate into the positive unity of a common political program. Nevertheless, it may be crucial for an oppressed com-

munity to forge a temporary consensus in order to confront a common oppressor. Such a consensus may evolve into delegating the role of negotiators to a particular group of individuals or an organisation. They may then, for reasons of political expediency, be called the sole representatives of a community. This status is granted to an organisation to counter the attempts to exploit differences of opinion amongst the dominated by the dominant power. The sole representative status is not granted to an organisation to enable it to maintain control over the community that it represents. The sole representative is not the organisation or group that represents the only opinion, the majority opinion, or the opinion with the greatest armed backing. But rather, it represents the opinion that is the outcome of a process of negotiations between diverse groups within a community who share a common experience of discrimination.

In general, the claim to sole representative status is a subtle issue and there is no single rule that can decide its moral and political legitimacy. For example, the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation) claims to be the sole representative of the Palestinian people. While this claim is difficult to assess, it is plausible, given the widespread support the PLO enjoys both in the Occupied Territories and among the Arabs in Israel. But the extent of support alone cannot be the basis on which the status of sole representative is decided. Rather, in

the case of the PLO, their claim is legitimised by the Palestinian National Council, which is the parliament in exile of the Palestinian people. Here, debate is conducted in an open and democratic manner. And the executive committee of the PLO is then chosen by elections and negotiations amongst the different organisations that the PLO comprises, and is not dependent on the whims of an absolute leader.

Resolving Differences

Clearly, the Tigers do not satisfy any of the moral or political criteria to qualify as the sole representative of the Tamil people. Not only are the Tigers a politically closed organisation, no one outside (or, for that matter, even inside) the organisation is aware of how political decisions are made. (Here "political" should be emphasised, because it is understandable to claim that "military" decisions and plans should be secret). Worse, the traditional Tiger method of resolving political differences is to physically eliminate them. In 1984 they killed Sundaram, a dissident who left the Tigers. In 1985, they killed Sri Sabaratnam, the TELO leader. In August 1987, shortly after the Peace Accord, they killed Vasudeva and other senior PLOTE leaders. In July 1989, they killed the TULF leaders, Amirthalingam and Yogeswaran, while negotiating with them. In September 1989, they killed Rajini Thiranagama for writing the book "Broken Palmyrah". And in June 1990, they killed the leader of the EPRLF, Pathmanaba, and several others. Given this history of violent suppression of alternative opinions, it would be difficult for the Tigers to claim that they have sought to build a democratic consensus through negotiations with other Tamil political parties. Thus, any basis to the legitimacy of their claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people must lie elsewhere.

The other basis on which the Tigers seek to stake their claim is their contribution to the armed struggle for Tamil liberation. The Tigers contend that the other Tamil political organisations seek to enjoy the fruits of peace without having paid the price of war. As the militarily strongest of the Tamil organisations, and as the only organisation to have consistently fought the Sri Lankan government (though this is debatable given their alliance

with the UNP regime from 1989 - 1990), the Tigers feel they have a right to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. There are three objections to the Tiger claim to this status, even if one accepts their superior military performance as a reasonable basis on which to make it.

Three Objections

First, accepting the Tiger claim that since they have fought the longest and the hardest they should represent the Tamil people, doesn't mean having to accept the claim that they should be the sole representative of the Tamil people. The fact that the Tigers have the strongest military capacity gives them a pragmatic claim to representation (since if they so desire they can spoil the chances of peace). And the fact that they have fought the hardest may give them political legitimacy among the Tamil people. But both these factors, at best, give the Tigers a basis from which to claim the status of the main representative (not sole representative) of the Tamil people.

Second, if the basis for representing the Tamil people were derived directly from the extent to which an armed organisation forcibly extracted concessions from the Sri Lankan state, then the Tigers might have to make way for the IPKF! Any observer of the Northeast in mid 1987 was aware that it was only the threat of intervention from India that thwarted a UNP government defeat of the Tigers and conquest of Jaffna. This is clearly unacceptable and thus casts serious doubt on the very basis for Tiger claims to legitimacy.

Finally, although the Tigers may have been the most successful military organisation, this does not mean that they will be either the best representatives of the Tamil people or the best negotiators at the negotiating table. Their skill at warring does not automatically translate into skill as politicians and administrators. Negotiations towards the resolution of any conflict require patience and compromise. While the Tigers have shown patience in war, they have only shown impatience with peace. An uncompromising stance might make a successful warrior, but it is inimical to a successful negotiator. Thus, the Tigers have demonstrated that they can wage war, but in doing so, they have also demon-

strated that they will not pursue peace.

Response to Sinhala Nationalism

The second pro-Tiger argument is that the Tigers are a response to Sinhala nationalism. The claim is that while their tactics may be cruel and brutal, they are justifiable, given the nature of Sinhala nationalism. The politics of Tamil nationalism undoubtedly began as a response to Sinhala nationalism. The Tamils suffered a history of discrimination, violence and marginalisation at the hands of successive Sri Lankan governments. As Sinhala nationalism was both manipulated from above and mobilised from below, Tamils became increasingly alienated from the Sri Lankan polity. They used different political means to counter the oppressive politics of Sinhala nationalism. A series of failed pacts ultimately led to disillusionment and the pursuit of an armed struggle for "national liberation".

The initial resort to armed struggle by the Tamils may have been unavoidable, given the refusal of the Sri Lankan state to compromise. However, the subsequent direction taken by the Tamil militant struggle, under the domination of the Tigers, was very much a consequence of internal Tamil politics. Clearly, Sinhala nationalism provided the political context in which Tamil nationalism could become Tigerism. Nevertheless, the logic of a response to Sinhala nationalism, alone, fails to explain or justify Tiger excesses during the past decade. For example, Tigerists cannot blame Sinhala nationalism for the Tiger decision to murder rival Tamil political leaders, and student and human rights activists.

Sinhala nationalism did not compel the Tigers to kill Rajini Thiranagama or Vijitharan. The expulsion of thousands of Muslims from the Northeast and the massacres of hundreds of others is not part of a natural Tamil nationalist response to the oppression of the Sinhala state. The opposition expressed by the Tamils of Mannar to the expulsion of Muslims, and the recent Tiger killings of Tamils who were protecting Muslims, suggests that many Tamils see this aspect of Tiger behaviour as brutal and inhuman, and having no relevance to the Tamil struggle for liberation. However, there obviously are Tigerists who claim that all individ-

uals, groups or communities who were killed, massacred or expelled by the Tigers were traitors to the Tamil cause.

They argue that killing those who oppose the Tigers is a necessary aspect of the struggle for liberation from Sinhala oppression. The Tigers usually define as traitors and then execute individuals who have significant sympathy and support among the Tamil people. And they are killed precisely for that reason. If the condemnation of these individuals as traitors is to make any sense, then the word traitor must be redefined to mean anyone opposed to the Tigers. This implies that any Tamil who is not a Tigerist is a traitor. The problem with this position, leaving aside its callousness, is that it is really a variation of the sole representative argument, which was earlier shown to be untenable.

Regardless of how vicious or uncompromising Sinhala nationalism may be, Tamil nationalism need not have adopted those very same characteristics. At the very least, the Tamil nationalist movement should have and could have maintained a semblance of internal democracy. Instead of being part of a reasonable response to the domination of Sinhala nationalism, actions by the Tigers are a reflection of the Tiger attempt to create a Tamil identity devoid of freedom, diversity and autonomy. Thus, the Tiger response is just that: a Tiger response. It is not a Tamil response and it cannot be morally or politically justified as a weapon against Sinhala nationalism.

The Last Defence

The most plausible argument for the Tigers today is that they are the last defence of an oppressed Tamil nation against Sinhala domination. This argument is put forward not only by Tigerists, but also by Tamils who have strongly condemned Tiger tactics and are opposed to their narrow political agenda. There are several problems with the notion that the Tigers are playing a positive role by acting as a buffer between the Tamil people and the Sri Lankan state.

The impression that the Tigers are protecting the Tamil people is blatantly false. The most obvious example again, is mid-1987, when they were retreating before the Sri Lankan army and were ultimately protected by the intervention of In-

dia. More notoriously, the Tigers have been known to setup ambushes and landmines in populated areas in order to invite retaliation on Tamil civilians by the armed forces (the Sri Lankan armed forces have, of course, obliged them) and increase their "support". Finally, they are the only active Tamil organisation in the Northeast precisely because they have banned or destroyed all others. Still, Tamil nationalists feel compelled to support or, at least, justify Tiger actions because they fear a Tiger defeat "will set the Tamil struggle back one more generation".

Sinhala Monolith?

This sentiment can be traced to a view about Sinhala politics, shared by many Tamil nationalists, that "all Sinhala regimes are the same". They claim that as far as the Tamils are concerned the UNP is the same as the SLFP, which is the same as the JVP, which is the same as the LSSP, and so on. Furthermore, they argue that the Sri Lankan state's willingness to give concessions to the Tamils is usually the consequence of a military or political setback, rather than the result of a genuine change of attitude in favour of a political settlement.

This reading of Sinhala politics ignores the diversity of forces encompassed within it and the extent to which Sinhala politics, itself, is up for grabs. For example, it fails to adequately explain the most important recent development in Sinhala politics - the defeat of the JVP. Here, the most virulent element of Sinhala nationalism was defeated politically and militarily. This, in fact, is in stark contrast to Tamil politics, where the most virulent exponent of Tamil nationalism - the Tigers - succeeded in defeating everybody else. Moreover, today's baseline for political negotiations with the Tamils is not no rights, but rather the measure of regional autonomy constitutionalised in the Thirteenth Amendment. It is also important to note that even at the height of anti-Tamil violence in the South of Sri Lanka - July 1983 - there has always been a vocal, albeit small, group of Sinhala leftist and liberals who have consistently supported Tamil rights and opposed Sinhala chauvinism.

Still, Tamil nationalists counter, there is no concrete sign of these changes in Sinhala nationalism. The Premadasa regime continues to dil-

lydally on negotiations and has failed to put forward a set of proposals to resolve the conflict. They argue that this regime has shown the same reluctance to pursue a political solution as the previous UNP regimes. This is true, but it obscures an important distinction between the political strategy of the current UNP regime and the previous UNP regime, on the one hand, and the current UNP regime and the Tigers, on the other. The Jayawardene regime sought to consolidate power by achieving a military victory over the Tamils. This was the main goal of "Operation Liberation" in mid 1987. The Premadasa regime, however, would prefer to consolidate its power by resolving the conflict, politically. If the conflict is resolved, it would free up billions of rupees from the defence budget for expenditure on economic infrastructure. Aid would flow in from the West with little or no strictures. The Northeast would revive economically from the end of the war and Sri Lanka would enter a period of rapid economic growth. Premadasa could then portray himself (not inaccurately) as the leader who brought peace and prosperity to Sri Lanka.

Tamil or Tigerist?

If this is so, why doesn't Premadasa put forward an extensive package of devolution that can be accepted by the majority of the Tamil people? The answer, of course, is that he lacks the political courage to stand up to the Sinhala nationalists. A political solution is a desideratum for the Premadasa regime, but not a necessity. The Premadasa regime can survive without resolving the conflict in the Northeast because the war does not threaten its power at the centre, unlike the JVP rebellion which did. Although the current regime doesn't need to resolve this conflict in order to survive, it would prefer to do so.

But, the Tigers need the conflict in order to survive. The very survival of Tigerism depends on the ability of the Tigers to ensure that the Tamil people are shut off from the possibility of achieving a political settlement. They fear that with the democratic space that peace would inevitably bring, they would lose their domination over Tamil politics. While the changes in Sinhala nationalism are real, they are

not discernible, because just at the moment when Sinhala nationalism has been weakened, Tamil nationalism has taken the Tigerist turn and has veered away from the course of a negotiated settlement. But, Tamil nationalists counter, even if the Tigers don't want a political solution, they are our only alternative. If they are defeated there is nobody else.

Invoking the absence of an alternative as a plausible reason to support the Tigers is either the last resort of a Tigerist defence, or the first (and only) concession made to the Tigers by those Tamils, whether leftists, liberals or nationalists, who support a just settlement to the conflict. At this juncture what distinguishes a Tigerist from a Tamil (liberal, leftist or nationalist) is the next step. A Tigerist will use the absence of an alternative as an excuse to support the Tigers. A Tamil (liberal, leftist or nationalist) will be impelled by the absence of an alternative to create one.

The Alternative

The alternative to Tigerism can be created by drawing from four different arenas of Tamil politics. The first and most important is the Northeast, where there are numerous civilian and community organisations that have been working for the past decade. Student organisations, women's organisations, citizen's committees, refugee and rehabilitation organisations, the church and other groups have worked silently and tirelessly for years to pick up the pieces after the destruction wrought by the war. These groups have been silenced by the Tigers, who have either banned them or prevented them from working independently. Their independent voices represent the genuine will of the Tamil people, but they cannot coordinate politically in the presence of the armed threat of the Tigers. A Tiger defeat will liberate them from their enforced silence.

The next arena is in Colombo, where many individuals and members of other Tamil organisations have fled, fearing Tiger threats of death and imprisonment. Despite the lack of cooperation of the UNP regime, these organisations and political parties are seeking support for a political solution. Outside Sri Lanka, where the Tigers cannot coerce the Tamil people with impunity, independent Tamil voices

are proliferating. Today, independent Tamil papers outnumber those put out by pro-Tiger elements, as support wanes for the Tigers among the exile Tamil community. Opposition, albeit passive, to the Tigers in North America and Europe has become more the norm than the exception.

The final arena is within the Tigers, themselves. No organisation, however totalitarian, can suppress all forms of internal disaffection. Silent opposition of Tigerism must exist within the Tigers as well. This nascent dissension within the Tigers might result in a change in the political perspective of the leadership. Though this is extremely unlikely. It is more probable that if Tigerism is to reform, itself, the leadership will have to be overthrown and give way to a more pragmatic and democratic politics. The inability to translate this multi-layered opposition into a concrete political program for the Tamil people in the Northeast has more to do with Tiger coercion than with Tamil consent to Tiger rule. Still, if the Tigers are defeated, what is to prevent the Premadasa regime from refusing to grant federalism to the Northeast?

New Forms of Struggle

The answer, of course, is nothing. The Premadasa regime, as mentioned earlier, doesn't need to end the conflict in order to survive. And if the armed part of the conflict is over, it may succumb to Sinhala nationalist pressure and continue its refusal to grant an adequate package of devolution to the Tamils. But this is no different from the Tigers were present. Their armed presence has not compelled the Premadasa regime to grant federal autonomy to the Tamil people. A defeat of the Tigers will not preclude the Tamils from mobilising and agitating for their rights. Tamils will be able to raise their voices more freely and express disagreements amongst themselves as they organise against the Sri Lankan state. They can harness support from within the Tamil community, from sympathetic Muslims and Sinhalese, and internationally to further their struggle for justice. Their voices may be stifled by an oppressive government unwilling to reach a settlement, but at least, they will be freed from the internal shackles of their so-called liberators.

New strategies for non-violent

political struggle will have to be mapped out since the armed struggle under the domination of the Tigers has become morally and politically bankrupt. This will involve a period of innovation as Tamils search for new means of political expression. The choice before the Tamil people is not only between armed struggle and nonviolent struggle. Instead, there exist a whole range of options that may be pursued - from non-violent civil disobedience to the use of non-lethal forms of agitation. For example, the Intifada, which unexpectedly emerged from the defeat of the Palestinian armed struggle, has shown us how an unarmed people can use non-lethal means of agitation to effectively express their opposition. And if today the Israelis are compelled to negotiate with the Palestinians, it is because of the decrease in Western support for Israel subsequent to the Intifada. Although it is unclear what the Tamil future will be after the Tigers have been defeated (because it will be created by Tamils, themselves), it is clear that if the Tigers continue to maintain their stranglehold on Tamil politics, the Tamil people will be denied the option of peace with dignity.

Conclusion

The chronology of pro-Tiger arguments indicates how opinions about the Tigers, even among Tamil nationalists, have evolved from the notion that, despite their brutality and cruelty, they are all the Tamil people have. The "sole representative" argument was a positive endorsement of the Tigers, but the "last defence" argument is merely a strained attempt at defending them. This pessimistic view of Tamil politics, however, ignores the silent yearning for peace and justice of the civilians in the Northeast. They have a story to tell and a political project to carry out. But they have been silenced and the political possibility that they represent has been sabotaged by threats and violence. Thus, for the Tamil people's desire for justice to become a political reality, Tigerism must go.

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