The Tamil Diaspora in Canada

Since the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in May 2009, the Tamil diaspora in Canada has been in a state of flux. There is infighting and jockeying for power amongst organizations, and some are working together in new political initiatives. After full scale war broke out again between Sri Lankan forces and the Tamil Tigers in 2008, there was initially very little reaction from the Tamil diaspora in Canada. The Tigers had fought these wars many times before, and had experienced setbacks. The LTTE leaders, and the World Tamil Movement (WTM) in Canada, had not directly asked the diaspora for anything more than financial support, despite many offering to organize protests and initiate lobbying efforts. The diaspora were informed that the LTTE could sustain itself as long as they provided the financial support. Indeed, hundreds of millions of dollars were given by the Tamil diaspora around the world, allowing the LTTE to maintain an active navy, air force, and army.

This changed in early 2009, and the LTTE realized that a ceasefire was necessary in order to regroup and continue fighting. Tamil leaders in the diaspora and LTTE front organizations around the world were asked to help. Although the World Tamil Movement was banned in Canada in June 2008, former members were and are still very much active in diaspora politics.

In order to fully understand the activities of the Tamil diaspora in Canada from 2009 to the present day, it is important to fully comprehend the changes that occurred in the LTTE's international structure. Before 2003, Selvarasa Pathmanathan (known as KP) was in charge of the international branch of the LTTE. He was responsible for fundraising, arms smuggling, and the supervision of overseas branches and front organizations. In 2003, he was replaced by Veerakathy Manivannan (known as Castro). Castro went on to populate overseas offices with his own trusted individuals. Between 2003 and 2008, KP was effectively out of the LTTE, and had 'retired' in Thailand. In December 2008, KP spoke with Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of

the LTTE, on the phone. As he recently told Toronto-based journalist D.B.S. Jeyaraj, "Prabhakaran called me and we had a very long conversation. He told me of the military situation in very frank terms…he wanted me to re-join the movement and start purchasing and transporting supplies again."

KP told Prabhakaran that it would likely take him over a year to re-establish smuggling networks. With the LTTE and its front organizations on terrorist lists in many countries, including Canada, fundraising and other activities would prove difficult. Prabhakaran responded that the LTTE would not survive another year. According to KP, "Prabhakaran said that I must spearhead the task of bringing about a ceasefire and getting the LTTE a respite. He wanted me to commence talks with whomever necessary and bring about a ceasefire." KP's re-entry into the Tamil political scene kick-started a rivalry between himself and the Castro faction, headed internationally by an individual known as Nediyavan, who currently lives in Norway. Prabhakaran re-appointed KP as the head of international

relations in the LTTE, and worked with diaspora leaders and front organizations (like the World Tamil Movement) to organize demonstrations around the world. He [QUOTE] "specifically asked them to demonstrate without any symbols of the LTTE and make it a non-partisan humanitarian exercise. There were many demonstrations and we were getting a positive response. But within weeks, Castro gave instructions through Nediyavan that demonstrators should carry LTTE flags and Prabhakaran's portrait" [END QUOTE].

In Canada, meetings took place in early 2009, and it was decided that a human chain protest would be organized. Organizers began appearing on Tamil radio and television stations in order to spread the word. Interestingly, the World Tamil Movement was only minimally involved during these early stages. The idea, at this time, was to bring about a ceasefire, so that the people would have a chance to leave the war zones. As such, the human chain, held on January 30, 2009 in downtown Toronto, only emphasized the humanitarian plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and Tamil Tiger

flags were noticeably absent. In subsequent meetings, members of WTM, many of whom were Castro supporters, were present, and slowly became the primary organizers.

It is important to note that the human chain in early January 2009 attracted close to forty thousand people. Once the LTTE flags became a dominant part of the demonstrations, many anti-LTTE members of the diaspora stayed home. Others, while not entirely agreeing with this shift in tone, continued to attend because they felt it was the only thing they could do to save their families in Sri Lanka. Some members of the diaspora lost over forty family members in 2009. Thus, it should also be noted that the simple fact that individuals attended a protest organized by WTM does not mean that they support the organization. Presently, in fact, WTM is losing its influence in the diaspora. Many perceive the group as corrupt, having pocketed much of the money collected in the closing months and years of the conflict. The majority of Tamils in Canada see WTM as a front organization for the Tamil Tigers, with

no reason to exist, let alone collect money, if the LTTE has been defeated.

After the initial impetus, much of the organizing of the early 2009 demonstrations in Toronto came from groups like the World Tamil Movement. However, the youth were mobilized primarily by an umbrella organization known as the Tamil Youth Organization (TYO). TYO helped WTM organize many of the protests in Toronto, as well as the Gardiner Expressway blockade on May 10, 2009. During the demonstrations in 2009, WTM was working closely with TYO to ensure that the youth were mobilized. Although WTM and TYO were organizing most of these demonstrations, many members of the Tamil community who attended do not know, to this day, who was organizing them. Most attended out of a genuine concern for their fellow Tamils in Sri Lanka.

TYO wields some influence over many Tamil Student Associations (TSAs) in universities around Ontario. Leading up to May 2009, TSAs around Ontario held fasts, awareness campaigns, and mini-demonstrations at their respective

campuses. Many TSAs, however, are starting to openly challenge TYO's control over their campus group. While many in the community accuse TYO of "radicalizing the youth," they openly express a commitment to Canadian society, and Canadian values. They also feel that they have a duty to ensure that Tamil youth do not forget their past. This sentiment can be traced to Prabhakaran's 27 November 2008 Heroes Day speech, during which he states, "I would also take this opportunity to express my affection and my praise to our Tamil youth living outside our homeland for the prominent and committed role they play in actively contributing towards the liberation of our nation." Many youth in the diaspora believe that Prabhakaran foresaw the imminent defeat of the LTTE, and passed the torch of the liberation struggle to them during this speech.

This belief that the struggle for Tamil self-determination is now in the hands of the diaspora has taken many forms. Organizations have arisen in the past year professing to move the struggle from armed conflict to political lobbying. One of the earliest initiatives in this

regard was the formation of a provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (or TGTE). After the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, KP took over the leadership role. KP called a meeting in Malaysia with about 35 Tamil nationalists from around the world (including Canada) to discuss the future course of the liberation struggle. The idea for a transnational government came into being at this meeting. It was decided that KP would lead the organization, but his arrest in August 2009 made this impossible. KP appointed Visvanathan Rudrakumaran (or "Rudra"), a lawyer based in New York, as the acting head of the TGTE after his arrest. From the outset, the cold war between the Rudra and Nediyavan factions negatively affected the smooth functioning of the TGTE. It is not an exaggeration to state that this leadership struggle between the KP/Rudra group and the Castro/Nediyavan group now affects most aspects of Tamil diaspora politics.

TGTE candidates began campaigning throughout April 2010, and elections were held simultaneously in eleven countries on May 2, 2010. Nediyavan and his supporters saw

the TGTE as a threat to their authority over the international LTTE structure, which is all that remained after the defeat of the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Many in the Tamil community assumed that the Nediyavan faction would take over the TGTE, and destroy it from within. Former members of WTM, many of whom support the Nediyavan faction, had a very good network going into the elections. They already had a list of names and addresses obtained from years of collecting funds for the LTTE. They made use of this support network to gain ground in the TGTE. They campaigned as a group, and shared resources. After the elections, it came to be known that of the twenty-five TGTE representatives in Canada at least fourteen were Castro/Nediyavan supporters. Grassroots support for the TGTE is difficult to gauge, and many in the diaspora are simply waiting to see what the group will accomplish.

These kinds of vendettas, petty bickering, and organizational struggles have unfortunately been one of the main characteristics of post-LTTE diaspora politics. When I asked a Tamil medical student about his thoughts on

developments in the diaspora after 2009, he remarked that there were "too many chiefs, and not enough Indians." In other words, there were too many leaders and not enough followers. A high-ranking member of the Transnational Government told me over coffee that "everybody wants to be the Moses, leading the Tamils out of the wilderness."

Many who are politically active in the Tamil community still advocate for the self-determination of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, and continue to express their respect for the LTTE. Many wish the Canadian government did more leading up to May 2009 to help Tamils in Sri Lanka, and express dismay that Canada's expressed commitment to humanitarianism often does not go beyond simple rhetoric. Such sentiments, however, are prevalent among the broader Canadian public, and are not held exclusively by the Tamil community.

With the focus still squarely on the Sri Lankan government, diaspora mobilization has moved from fundraising to political lobbying. With the defeat of the LTTE, one of the main forces quelling individual or

community level radicalization has been the embrace of political lobbying.

Many argue, rightly, that Tamil nationalism began as a political movement, and only later became an armed struggle under the LTTE. With the defeat of the LTTE, the struggle for Tamil self-determination will once again become a political movement, one now uniquely supported by a transnational diaspora community.

The emergence of these new political alternatives, especially diaspora organizations like TGTE, has the added benefit of being formed through democratic elections. Members of these organizations conduct themselves as elected officials, and it is likely that their self-identification as political representatives mandated by the Tamil community goes a long way in alleviating any potential for radicalization. While some scholars have argued that there are higher numbers of terrorist groups in democratic societies than in authoritarian ones, others note that democratic participation may reduce the likelihood of terrorism. As Noricks argues, "Since democracies provide

increased opportunities for both participation and nonviolent resolution of conflict and grievances, democracies should be less likely to produce terrorism."

While Noricks is discussing democratic countries in general, it would not be a stretch to contend that having elected officials as part of a transnational diasporic community could provide the same benefits for political actors. In other words, if we could imagine the transnational Tamil diaspora as a "nation" unto itself, it would stand to reason that if this nation conceived of itself as a democracy, it would also promote citizen satisfaction, and create new avenues through which to voice grievances.