

ISAS Brief

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Two Victories and a Defeat: India, Sri Lanka and the Minority Question

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Spontaneous street parties broke out, fireworks crackled in the air and strangers offered flowers to Sri Lankan soldiers to celebrate the news in Colombo – Asia's Idi Amin was no more! One of the Indian subcontinent's longest wars was at an end. The day before, street parties in New Delhi celebrated the victory of the Congress Party in the elections that marked the maturing of Indian democracy and the fact that the Tamil Nadu electorate had a sophisticated view of the situation in Sri Lanka. It is, hence, to be hoped that India, the regional superpower, will play an effective role to ensure peace with justice for the minorities in Sri Lanka.

The victory of the Congress Party was a victory for the whole of India and marks the deepening and strengthening of the roots of democracy as well as dynastic politics. Above all, the victory of the Congress Party was a vote for communal harmony and peaceful co-existence among the diverse religious, ethnic and caste communities in India. The victory of the Congress Party has also ushered in a younger generation with fresh thinking, with Rahul Gandhi as the embodiment of this change.

The victory of the Sri Lankan government, on the other hand, appears to be a Pyrrhic victory. It has come at great human cost in lives lost and maimed, damage to the international reputation of the country, and the erosion of the island's centuries old history of multiculturalism and co-existence among diverse ethnic and religious communities as well as damage to its democratic values and institutions.

The leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), listed as one of the world's deadliest terrorist organisations, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and his right hand man, Intelligence Chief, Pottu Amman, were shot dead by security forces in the morning of 18 May 2009 while trying to flee northeast Sri Lanka. They did not commit suicide or flee the country before the final dénouement, as had been predicted. Earlier, thousands of civilians, held as a human shield by the LTTE in the face of the final onslaught by the armed forces, were released and the organisation "silenced its guns" in the face of imminent defeat. Prabhakaran's son, Charles Anthony, who headed the air wing of the LTTE, and the head of its Peace Secretariat,

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Pullithevan, a familiar face from the days of the abortive Norwegian-brokered peace process, were killed hours earlier.

The deaths of Prabakaran, his son and the LTTE's highest commanders mark the end of an era – the bloodiest quarter century in Sri Lanka's modern history. The LTTE set the bar on violence very high in Lanka, the land pledged to protect the Buddhist Theravada doctrine. The state followed its example, having transformed the conflict into a form of *dharma yudhaya* (holy war) that legitimised great violence and Sinhala nationalism. While there were spontaneous street parties in Colombo to celebrate the demise of the LTTE, the Tamil-speaking minorities in Sri Lanka will certainly not share the triumph. The violence unleashed by the LTTE has left them more marginalised and traumatised than when the armed conflict began.

The Tamil minority at this time is depleted, scarred and factionalised, having been destroyed from within by the LTTE and without by the fury of the armed forces and the Sri Lanka state. The organisation assassinated Tamil moderates and used child soldiers and women to wage violence. To be sure, the government has tried to distinguish between the Tamil civilians and the LTTE but, all too often in the heat of the battle, they were reduced to the same thing and the Tamils in southern Sri Lanka are constantly racially profiled and, more often than not, have been treated as second class citizens. However, the LTTE was a symptom of a problem that morphed into a greater problem, the marginalisation of the Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslim minorities by the Sinhala majority state. Sustainable peace in the land of the Buddha will require addressing the root causes of the conflict which is the marginalisation and alienation of the minorities by an ethnic majoritarian developmental state trying to balance competing electoral demands. The devolution of power to the northern and eastern regions will be essential to ensure sustainable peace.

It is in this context that the resounding victory of the Congress Party in India may mark a new chapter in relations between the two countries and a new beginning that puts the past behind. As South Asia's regional superpower, India has significant leverage over Sri Lanka. It is a major trading partner and has had a long history of engagement with the Tamil question in Sri Lanka. In the early days, India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) funded and trained the LTTE in line with the central government's policy and, later in 1987, India sent peace-keeping troops to the island.

A post-conflict political solution in Sri Lanka would require India's involvement. The United States and Britain have condemned the humanitarian catastrophe unleashed by the Sri Lanka armed forces against the civilians caught in the war against the Tamil Tiger separatists, and have warned that Sri Lanka's leaders, as would have been the LTTE, would be held accountable for the those caught in the violence of the past days. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Justice Navanethem Pillay, has called for a special council to investigate "war crimes" in Sri Lanka. India and many of Sri Lanka's Asian donors have remained largely silent.

The Gandhi dynasty had an intimate connection with the conflict in Sri Lanka. It was Indira Gandhi's rule that saw the RAW being set up and training the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups. In turn, her son, Rajiv Gandhi, was assassinated in an LTTE suicide attack in Tamil Nadu at an election rally in a classic story of a blowback. It is, thus, the hope of the moderate Tamils in Sri Lanka that Rahul Gandhi's generation would put the past behind and steer the Sri Lanka government to seek a sustainable peace in the island. It is to be hoped that a strong

and stable Congress Party government will ensure that the defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lanka government forces translates into sustainable peace with justice for the minorities in the island.

The Sri Lankan issue turned out to be irrelevant to the outcome of India's election – the Tamil regional parties that played up the plight of their Sri Lankan kin fared poorly in the polls. The world will be watching India and its role in enabling the Sri Lanka government to address the root causes of the conflict and win the peace in Lanka.

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