

ISAS Brief

No. 86 – Date: 6 November 2008

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India's Tamil Politics and the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict

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The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is, no doubt, one of the world's most powerful terrorist organisations. However, the myth of its military invincibility has been built and nurtured for a long time by a variety of vested interests, ranging from Tamil chauvinists all over the world; to even Sri Lankan politicians who saw their political fortunes in the perpetuation of the ethnic conflict. This myth was broken on at least four occasions: (i) in 1987, when the then-Sri Lankan President, J. R. Jayawardane, drove the Tamil militants, including the LTTE, to the verge in his so-called "fight to the finish"; (ii) in 1987-89, when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) bottled up the LTTE in Vanni jungles and successfully carried out elections in the northeastern province; (iii) in 1995-96, when the then-Sri Lankan President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, again cleared them from Jaffna and the eastern province, pushing them into the jungles; and (iv) now, when the Sri Lankan security forces have trapped them in their last two districts of Killinochi and Mullaithivu.

Whenever the LTTE has been militarily cornered, the Tamil politicians of India, prompted by the LTTE, have raised the issue of "the security of Tamil people" and have pressured India to prevail over Colombo, if necessary, through diplomatic and even military intervention, to stop the war. These politicians succeeded in 1987 when India sent its MIG fighters to drop food packets to the conflict-marooned Tamils in Jaffna. This intervention paved the way for the July 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Agreement for the resolution of the ethnic conflict. The IPKF went to Sri Lanka under the provisions of this agreement. The factors that added weight to the Tamil politicians' pressures on New Delhi then were many and varied; the most significant being the deep strategic discord between Colombo and New Delhi during Indira Gandhi's Prime Ministership in India. Her successor, Rajiv Gandhi, tried to persuade Jayawardane to address the issue peacefully and to seek its negotiated political resolution. However, he found Colombo deceptive and insincere. Much water has flown down the Indian and Sri Lankan rivers since then.

The political mood even in Tamil Nadu started changing with the IPKF fighting the LTTE in Sri Lanka. However, with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE in May 1991, the LTTE lost much of its sympathy and support among the Tamils of India. The major Tamil parties of India broadly distanced themselves from the LTTE, especially its terrorism and

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separatist agenda, though the LTTE links have continued with fringe Tamil nationalist streak and the vested interests that thrive on the LTTE's smuggling and procurement network in Tamil Nadu. Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), led by V. Gopalswamy (Vaiko), and Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), led by Dr S. Ramadoss, are the two most vocal proponents of this Tamil nationalist streak and, hence, proponents of the LTTE's interests in India. Among the major parties, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), led by M. Karunanidhi, and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK), led by M. G. Ramachandran, had been patronising the Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups since the outbreak of the ethnic conflict across the Palk Strait in the early 1980s, or even earlier. Both these parties used these Sri Lankan militant leaders as their musclemen in Tamil Nadu politics. After the death of Ramachandran and the post-1987 conflict between the LTTE and the non-LTTE Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups, Karunanidhi continued to keep links with them. Ramachandran's successor, J. Jayalalitha, distanced herself from the LTTE. The DMK and Karunanidhi also came under scrutiny in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination probe conducted by Justice M. L. Jain. Using this as a pretext, the Congress Party withdrew support from the Gujral government at the centre in 1997 because the DMK was an ally of that government. Even before the present resurgence of the Sri Lankan government's war against the LTTE, the MDMK and the PMK did not relent in their advocacy of the LTTE. In 2005, their pressure, with the implicit backing of the DMK [now being an ally of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the centre], succeeded in scuttling a near-finalised defence cooperation agreement between India and Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan government's present campaign against the LTTE started in June 2006. Despite claims to the contrary by the Sri Lankan government, this campaign has not been without massive suffering for the ordinary Tamil people of Sri Lanka. Estimates of the number of internally-displaced people from this war have gone up to half a million. The life of Tamils living even outside the war zone, for example, in Colombo and other provinces, has been badly affected under security regulations. A number of them have disappeared while others have been displaced. More than 300 Tamils were pushed out of Colombo in want of adequate "documentation". The Sri Lankan government has also gagged the media and other independent sources of information on war-related issues. The international community, including the United Nations, has leveled serious charges of human rights violations on the Sri Lankan government. With the onslaught of military campaign in the north closing in on the LTTE strongholds, the excessive use of helicopter gunships and air bombardment, and the LTTE's penchant for using human shields (of innocent civilians under their control) to protect them, the miseries of Tamil people have increased many fold.

The deteriorating human rights situation in Sri Lanka has given spurt to Tamil Nadu's emotive politics. While the MDMK and the PMK have always been restive on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue, other radical outfits such as Viduthalai Chiruthaikal Katchi of Thirumavalavan, the Tamil Nationalist Party of Nedumaran and Periyar Dravida Kazhagam have now joined them to flaunt their support for the LTTE which is a banned terrorist organisation in India. All of them have asked India to intervene in the current Sri Lankan crisis to secure a ceasefire. The Communist Party of India added to the political momentum to this issue by calling for a strike on 2 October 2008, in solidarity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka. The Left, in its disenchantment with the UPA government on the question of Indo-US agreement, did not hesitate from using the Sri Lankan issue to mobilise support in the south and put pressure on the central UPA government and its local DMK ally. It announced that AIDMK would also join the 2 October 2008 strike. Though the Left and AIDMK have made it clear that their concern is only with the innocent Tamil civilians of Sri Lanka and not with the plight of the

LTTE, their attacks have been sharp and have focused on Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, Karunanidhi, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The DMK could not afford to be left out on the Sri Lankan issue while its rivals were cashing on it politically. In order to outdo his political rivals, Karunanidhi issued a strong statement on 5 October 2008, asking thousands of people to send telegrams to Prime Minister Singh, urging the central government to "intervene immediately and stop the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka." A day later, he even went to the extent of threatening the central government by saying that if it "fails to find a solution to the problems of Tamil people, we may be forced to consider whether this government is necessary." On 14 October 2008, he called an All-Party meeting on the Sri Lankan issue and adopted a resolution stating that "the centre should stop the thirty-year old civil war that has resulted in thousands of Tamils' deaths in Eelam. Since Indian military aid is resulting in genocide of Tamils, this meeting urges its immediate stoppage... This meeting informs the centre that if India does not fulfill the demands (the inaction) may result in the resignation of all Members of Parliament from Tamil Nadu." Though the LTTE was not mentioned anywhere in the resolution, the reference to "Eelam" was a clear recognition of the LTTE's separatist agenda. Kanimozhi, Karunanidhi's daughter, was the first to submit her resignation from the membership of Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament), in response to the All-Party resolution. The submission of the resignation, not to the Chairman of Rajya Sabha but to her own father, clearly underlined its tactical thrust. A number of other DMK Members of Parliament did likewise subsequently. Karunanidhi was clearly bashing the centre to blunt the attacks of his local rivals for his being an ally of the UPA's Sri Lanka policy. Other DMK allies such as Dr Ramadoss even asked for a separate Tamil Nadu if the centre was to ignore the demands of the Tamils. Vaiko, who had fallen out from the DMK-led alliance, threatened to take armed Tamils from Tamil Nadu to fight with the LTTE against the Sri Lankan government.

Karunanidhi succeeded in his political objective of taking the wind out of the sails of his rivals on the Sri Lankan issue. His political thunders forced the central government to launch a number of political and diplomatic manoeuvres to diffuse the issue. Prime Minister Singh called Karunanidhi on 6 October 2008 and then rushed his National Security Adviser (NSA), M. K. Narayanan, to assure the Tamil leader that everything needed to be done in relation to Sri Lanka will be done. The Sri Lankan High Commissioner was summoned by the NSA to express "India's grave concern and unhappiness". Minister of External Affairs, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, made a statement in Rajya Sabha saying, "what is required in Sri Lanka is a peaceful and negotiated political settlement which allows each community to realise its own potential within the framework of a united Sri Lanka" and he promised that the "Government of India will do all in its power to achieve this goal, to ameliorate the humanitarian conditions in Sri Lanka and has been making representations to the Government of Sri Lanka at several levels". A week later, in another statement in the Parliament, he reiterated India's concerns with regard to the "deteriorating humanitarian situation in the northern part of Sri Lanka" and emphasised India's "conviction that there is no military solution to the ethnic conflict". He informed the Parliament about the forthcoming visit of Basil Rajapakse, brother and senior adviser to the President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapakse, to India. This visit was the result of a telephone conversation between Prime Minister Singh and President Rajapakse.

This visit took place on 26 October 2008. Basil Rajapakse met Foreign Minister Mukherjee, Narayanan and Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon. In the statement issued after his visit, it was disclosed that the "positive and constructive" discussions centered "on a range of issues." India conveyed its concerns and received the assurances that the "safety and

wellbeing of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka is being taken care of.” India also decided to send “around 800 tonnes” of supplies for the “affected civilians in the North”, the delivery of which will be facilitated by the Sri Lankan government. The contrast with the 1987 situation was stark. The “Indian side called for the implementation of the 13th Amendment” and the Sri Lankan special envoy emphasised that his government and the President were “committed to a political process that would lead to a sustainable solution.” It is important to note that there was no reference to the 13th Amendment in the Sri Lankan response as this is a contentious issue in Sri Lankan politics. It was significant that “both sides agreed that terrorism should be countered with resolve”, meaning that the Sri Lankan government’s military operations against the LTTE would continue unhindered.

After the meeting, Foreign Minister Mukherjee went to Chennai to brief Karunanidhi who, in response to Sri Lanka’s assurances, called off his demand of resignations. The UPA President, Sonia Gandhi, also called Karunanidhi to calm him down. The political turmoil in Tamil Nadu on the Sri Lankan issue was pacified. It was clearly understood that neither the Sri Lankan government’s war against the LTTE would be stopped, nor India’s military support to Sri Lanka would be withdrawn. New Delhi appeared neither willing nor constrained to review its Sri Lanka policy and Chennai was not determined to pull down the UPA government at the centre on the Sri Lankan issue.

While New Delhi felt compelled to diffuse the coalition pressures from Tamil Nadu, it was constrained to do anything to force Colombo to act on the question of the war or on the issue of devolution of power and political solution. Unlike in 1987, India has huge investments in Sri Lanka which cannot be exposed to the anger of the Sinhalese chauvinists by echoing the dubious emotions of the Tamil chauvinists in Tamil Nadu. Sri Lanka has also been craftily playing the Pakistan and China cards to force India into following the Colombo line. Even public Indian disapproval by Narayanan of Sri Lanka’s arms procurements from China and Pakistan did not make any difference in this respect. In fact, China is gradually consolidating its strategic presence in Sri Lanka and there are Sri Lankan strategic analysts who would even prescribe to encouraging China to set up monitoring posts in Sri Lanka to watch India’s nuclear and missile activities on the southern peninsula if India detracts from the present policy to Colombo’s disadvantage. India is also helpless in pressuring Colombo on the devolution of power to the Tamil areas because, while the LTTE is obstinate in not wanting to come to the negotiating table, the non-LTTE groups, who would be the beneficiaries of the devolution, are unable to present themselves as a united force. There seems to be a broad strategic consensus in India that de-fanging a terrorist group such as the LTTE may not be undesirable in the long run. After all, India is also battling its terrorists hard at home.

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