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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## Sri Lanka's Civil War: End of an Era?

Nadeeka Withana

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*Sri Lanka's protracted civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the state has taken a dramatic turn. A political solution to the ethnic conflict will face a range of challenges. The manner in which the government steers through these challenges would set the tone for the country's future.*

THE SRI LANKAN government has done what was once considered impossible. It is looking at defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), thereby ending one of the longest running internal wars in Asia. Having been engaged in a cycle of war and peace for several decades, the LTTE has been weakened to an unprecedented level. While there is much euphoria regarding the "imminent victory" over the Tigers, the most crucial phase of the insurgency is yet to come.

Dealing with the post-conflict period, which would lay the groundwork for sustaining long-term peace and stability, will be the most immediate challenge. There is also the critical issue of finding a political solution to the ethnic conflict, in which the insurgency is rooted. The dramatically-changed operational environment has created several opportunities for the government, yet it remains unclear what incentives it will have to find a long-term political solution to the conflict.

### **LTTE's *raison d'être*.**

Tamil militant groups, including the LTTE took up arms against the state, in the 1970s in response to the discriminatory policies of successive Sinhalese-dominated governments. The conflict escalated after the 1983 pogrom which saw Tamils' support for separatism and armed struggle rise. The state's failure to provide a political solution only further perpetuated the LTTE's *raison d'être*. Conversely, one reason why a resolution could not be found was also, the LTTE itself.

Over the decades, it successfully silenced moderate Tamil voices and eliminated rival militant groups. Rising from a rag-tag group of armed youth to an organisation with a sophisticated military capability and a strong overseas support network, the LTTE established itself as the sole representative of the Sri Lankan Tamils, thus ensuring that it would not be ignored in any discourse pertaining to the ethnic conflict. While Tamils face legitimate grievances, the LTTE, having become a formidable force within

this discourse, proved to be a hurdle to any progress on the political front.

The group's terror tactics, its uncompromising commitment to creating Eelam and the tactical use of peace negotiations to convalesce and build its military strength were obstacles to any political settlement that also ensured the territorial integrity of the Sri Lankan state.

At present the LTTE finds itself cornered to a small area in north-eastern Sri Lanka. As highlighted by LTTE leader Prabhakaran in his 2008 Heroes' Day speech, the group had in the past found themselves in similar situations and overcome them. However, the present situation is markedly different from then. There is less interference from external elements in support of the LTTE and the present government has been strong enough to resist external pressure. Also, any continued interference from neighbouring India is unlikely to take the form it did in the 1980s which ranged from support for the militants to the enforcement of a peace accord. Overall, despite the occasional terrorist attacks, the LTTE is not in a position to bring about even a stalemate, as it had done throughout the war-peace cycle.

### **Ideal situation for the Government?**

The situation however, is far from ideal for the government. For the military, the most immediate hurdle is consolidating the captured areas, securing it against infiltration and laying the ground work for the reconstruction process to take place. A similar post-conflict transition in the eastern province was done with relative ease, partially due to the TMVP -- Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal, the LTTE breakaway faction. Despite accusations of corruption and violence, the TMVP possessed the ground knowledge to at least maintain control over the area. However, the situation in the north is far more challenging due to the ethnic makeup and the population's historical experience.

It is yet unclear how the government and the Sinhala-dominated military will deal with these issues. Confidence-building measures will take years to be effective and requires resources and a strong political will. Time is not a luxury that any elected government can afford especially when it is facing a daunting series of socio-political issues. Additionally, the resources required may be in short supply in the current global economic crisis. Given these odds, there is a risk of the government opting for tight military control at the expense of development and reconstruction, a situation that has existed in the Jaffna peninsula since 1995. A repeat of this in the entire Northern Province however, may very well risk undoing progress made so far on the military front.

Irrespective of the approach taken, there are practical logistical issues involved in securing and developing this large area. The inevitable grievances caused by uneven development and security can provide political and geographic space for the LTTE to survive and perhaps resume violent activities, even if only limited in nature. Moreover, despite being weak in Sri Lanka, the group's sophisticated international financial and support network remains intact and over time, would be in a position to keep the organisation functioning.

### **How Not to Alienate the Population**

Any attempts to "wipe out" the group will be counterproductive as it would further alienate the population. However, LTTE leader Prabhakaran is unlikely to renounce the armed struggle. Hence, specifically targeting the top leadership might be necessary. Under such circumstances, the group could factionalise under the next tier of leaders, with some opting to continue fighting and others renouncing the armed struggle and possibly entering the political mainstream. While this would eliminate the single threat of the LTTE as a group, it will also take the conflict to the next phase with multiple groups operating in a low-intensity conflict.

To presume that the factions would die out fighting each other and the state might be premature,

especially given the international support networks and support of disillusioned Tamils both in Sri Lanka and abroad. Pushing through the post-conflict reconstruction efforts and trying to win over the population, even at the risk of these LTTE remnants creating a hostile environment, would be the best possible option for the long run.

These local efforts must also be complemented by a political solution to the ethnic conflict. However, this requires a strong, confident government, with the will to bring about a long term political solution. Having effectively silenced its critics, curtailing the media, and almost neutralising the LTTE, the current government seems to have a unique opportunity to put in place mechanisms to find a long-term solution. However, the apparent military victory is encouraging some radical Sinhala elements within the government to reject any compromise. The motivation for a political solution that is also satisfactory to the Tamils may be lacking. The lack of a wider Sinhala public consensus on what a just settlement with the Tamils looks like, as well as the lack of a strong moderate Tamil party, has also given a voice to this extremist position.

The developments seen over the past few years have given the government an opportunity not afforded to past regimes. However, whether it will pursue a lasting peace with the same zeal it pursued the LTTE remains uncertain. While the present war might be brought to an end, there are still threats to a lasting peace. The government must avoid the implementation of flawed policies in its aftermath. Also, the failure to address the underlying issues and grievances of the Tamils could set the tone for another violent manifestation of the ethnic conflict.

*Nadeeka Withana is Senior Research Analyst with the S. Rajaratnam School for International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. She is attached to the School's constituent unit, the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR).*