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# Empowering Diasporas

The Dynamics of Post-war Transnational Tamil Politics

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**The sole responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the authors.**

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## Abstract

In "Empowering Diasporas: The Dynamics of Post-war Transnational Tamil Politics", Luxshi Vimalarajah and R. Cheran analyse the current trends and the transnational politics of the Tamil Diaspora after the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. The main objective of the paper is to offer a nuanced understanding of the Tamil Diaspora politics as it is being currently expressed globally and specifically in the United Kingdom and Canada. This study examines the driving factors, the underlying change theory and the internal as well as external dynamics to shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of Tamil Diaspora politics in the post-war era. The study aims to initiate a new discourse among policy, academic and diaspora circles by critically analysing the conventional understanding of the Tamil Diaspora.

The authors suggest looking at the Tamil Diaspora as a rational political actor vested with interest and agency. The paper argues that the Tamil Diaspora will remain a critical factor in any conflict resolution effort, including those by host countries, due to its 'homeland' politics and its stance towards the domestic policies of the host, such as the United Kingdom and Canada. Hence, any political settlement of the ethno-political conflict in Sri Lanka will only be sustainable if the Tamil Diaspora is included as an essential stakeholder in conflict resolution efforts and their concerns are given due consideration.

The paper emphasizes that the reorientation of Tamil politics after the war needs to be based on the insight that every new beginning must incorporate a critical evaluation of its own history and the errors of the past. The Tamil Diaspora can only remain a credible actor if it engages critically with its own stereotypes, its enemy images, and if it explores new ground in terms of new networks and strategic alliances that transcend ethnic boundaries. The success of Tamil Diaspora formations depends not only on their capacity to mobilize their own constituency and on the access they have to power-centres in the host countries, but also on how willing they are to assess their own strengths and weaknesses.

We owe them for having forced the barriers of communication, for having made themselves seen and heard for what they are, not spectators of delinquency and invasion, but workers, families, from both here and elsewhere, with their peculiarities and the universality of their condition as modern proletarians. [...] As a result, we understand better what democracy is: an institution of collective debate, the conditions of which are never handed down from above – We owe them for having [...] recreated citizenship among us, in as much as it is not an institution or a statute but a collective practice [...] they] have contributed responsibly to the life of the community by giving rise to new forms of activism and renewing older ones. Now if activism is not everything, which makes up active citizenship, it is clearly one of its indispensable components. One cannot at the same time deplore democratic apathy and yet disregard the significance of the recent mobilizations. By this, they have given political activity the transnational dimension, which we so greatly require in order to open up perspectives of social transformation and of civility in the era of globalization.

Etienne Balibar (2000, 42-43)

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In a dramatic turn of events, the long-enduring ethno-political violence ended abruptly with the total military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 in Sri Lanka. This last war was preceded by a failed attempt to bring peace through an internationally facilitated peace process, which lasted on paper until January 2008. In reality, violent hostilities had already begun in 2006: first, in the form of a shadow-war that gradually transformed into an open un-declared war and, second, into the full outbreak of violence in 2007. The war ended on May 19, 2009, crushing the decades-old violent secessionist struggle led by the LTTE, wiping out its leaders and detaining more than 250,000 non-combatants in camps. Alone, this last “war without witness”<sup>2</sup> claimed more than 40,000 civilians, which extended the total number of deaths over the past 35 years to more than 140,000.<sup>3</sup>

The abrupt end signifies an important rupture in the continuity of Tamil politics at the national and transnational levels while offering challenges and opportunities for Tamil communities to rethink and re-articulate anew their demands for equality, justice and sovereignty. One clear result of the rupture is the emergence of the Tamil Diaspora as a key player in framing the post-war Tamil political

1 The authors wish to thank friends and colleagues from the international community and leading Tamil Diaspora activists for their constructive-critical feedback on an earlier draft. The authors would especially like to thank Norbert Ropers, Sharryn Aiken, Alexander Austin and Sonja Neuweiler for their detailed comments. We are grateful to Sybille Etling, Anuppriya Sriskandarajah, Miriam Hoepfner and Charan Rainford for their research assistance and to Astrid Fischer for desktop publishing. R. Cheran would also like to thank the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, for funding a research project on Diasporas, Transnational Practices and Global Engagement. Insights and findings of that project have been significant in writing this paper. We would also like to thank all the people who were interviewed for this paper and whose names have not been disclosed for reasons of political sensitivity.

2 “War without Witness”, *The Times*, 8 January 2010.

3 Gordon Weiss, former UN official, cited the figures in an interview with the ABC news, 9 February 2010, available at [www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2009/s2814960.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2009/s2814960.htm) (last accessed 19 August 2010). The numbers often cited by mainstream media, the Government of Sri Lanka and some donor agencies range from 65,000 to 70,000 (see Reuters Report, “Island Slides Back into Civil War”, 4 August 2008 and CIDA, “Sri Lanka”, available at [www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/srilanka-e](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/srilanka-e)). However these estimates grossly under report the actual casualty figures. A study by researchers at Harvard Medical School and Washington University put the death toll from violent conflicts in Sri Lanka at 215,000, including the fatalities connected to the JVP insurrection. Although the study deals with the period between 1955 and 2001, it indicates that most of the deaths occurred between 1983 and 2001 (Obermeyer/Murray/Gakidou 2008). Based on the above and on our own estimates, the number of fatalities should be approximately 200,000 including combatants.

discourse.<sup>4</sup> Sections of the Tamil Diaspora even assert that now the agency is with them and the Tamil national struggle has become the primary responsibility of this community.<sup>5</sup>

From January 2009 until the first week of June 2009, Tamils residing in major cities such as London, Toronto, Sydney and Chennai<sup>6</sup> staged sit-ins, chanted slogans, snarled traffic on motorways and blocked public spaces. Dozens of people immolated themselves in India, Malaysia, the UK and Switzerland to protest the inactivity of the UN, USA and the European Union. These protests, highlighting the plight of the Tamil population in Northern Sri Lanka, have been unprecedented in the political mobilization of Tamil Diaspora and were among the largest demonstrations in England and Canada. As Balibar illustrates in the context of protests by “*sans papiers*”, the Tamil protests have given a new and vigorous twist to popular participation in democratic protests in Europe and North America.

The Tamil Diaspora activism after May 19, 2009 represents a paradigm shift in its mode, content, strategy and leadership. This involves a move from centrally planned and executed to spontaneous and unstructured events, carried out via modern electronic communications. Many organisations and initiatives have emerged since, which indicates a shift from a uni-polar to a multi-polar strategy. Furthermore, there is a striking difference with regard to the leadership, which has transformed from a hierarchical, single leadership into a collective of individuals.

The heightened activities of the Tamil Diaspora have also attracted a number of new studies and articles that aim to shed more light on the variety of activities currently undertaken by this community. The extensive study by the International Crisis Group (ICG)<sup>7</sup> on the Tamil Diaspora can be seen as the most comprehensive in this regard. To begin, the authors of the ICG report, titled *The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora after the LTTE*, outline in the introduction that “the report focuses on the pro-Tiger elements, which constitute the vast majority of the diaspora” (ICG 2010, 29). When analysing the current Tamil Diaspora activities, the authors come to the conclusion that the Tamil Diaspora lives in a world of “denial” and holds onto the “separatist” and “pro-LTTE” ideology and states “most Tamils abroad remain profoundly committed to Tamil Eelam, the existence of a separate state in Sri Lanka. This has widened the gap between the diaspora and Tamils in Sri Lanka. [...] Unwilling to recognize the scale of defeat, and continuing to believe an independent state is possible, however, many diaspora leaders have dismissed Tamil politicians on the island either as traitors for working with the government or as too weak or scared to stand” (ICG 2010, i). Although the authors rightly concede that the only way to prevent radicalization of the Tamil Diaspora and the Tamils in Sri Lanka is through addressing the political grievances, they nevertheless oversimplify the motives and underlying factors behind the quest for independence and simply bundle everything under the label of “pro-Tiger Diaspora”.

Some of our findings raise questions about the above assumptions and conclusions. Specifically, the exact overlap and divergence between the LTTE and Tamil Diaspora has provided and is now a crucial opportunity and entry point for conflict transformation. In any conflict setting communities are mobilized by interests. However, to say that this is total or complete mobilization would be erroneous. Peacebuilding work is about trying to work within the nuances, strengthen weakened voices and reach the hard-to-reach. International

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the economic strength of Tamil Diaspora, there are also other spheres where the diaspora has become influential. Tamil websites or Tamil digital diaspora have become a rich source. Political analysts from the diaspora have a significant presence in the mainstream Tamil media in Sri Lanka. Arus from Wales, United Kingdom, *Ithayachandran* from the United Kingdom and a host of others write regular political columns to *Virakesari* and *Thinakkural* dailies in Sri Lanka. D.B.S. Jeyaraj is one of the most prominent political analysts in the Diaspora. In the general elections 2010, the Tamil Diaspora provided financial support for TNA, TPNF, Mano Ganesan’s Democratic People’s Front and *sirupaanmaith thamizar mahasabai* (Minority Tamils’ Assembly) that contested in the general election as an independent group advocating for the oppressed caste in Jaffna.

<sup>5</sup> Justification for this position comes from the *maaveerar naal urai* (Great Heroes Day Speech) by the leader of the LTTE, V. Pirabakaran, in 2008 where he emphasized the role of the diaspora. This position has been further articulated in editorials appearing in *Eelanadu*, *Eelamurasu*, *Canada Ulagaththamizar* and various other Tamil weekly newspapers. In the interviews with Tamil Youth Organization (TYO) and other youth organisations in London and Canada, some of the leaders maintained this position.

<sup>6</sup> In Chennai, the protest was almost entirely by the local Tamil population whose links with the Tamil Diaspora had grown significantly over the years and can be expected to emerge as a factor in shaping the future Tamil politics.

<sup>7</sup> The ICG report is the only comprehensive study so far that analyses the Tamil Diaspora activities after May 2009.

experiences have shown that broad categorizations of peoples are rarely true and frequently counter-productive for the strategizing of approaches for transforming conflict. The following is a short outline of the project's key efforts in elucidating this relationship.

The Tamil Diaspora and its long-distance nationalism have often been accused of fuelling conflict and thus prolonging the war. It is plausible that the LTTE would not have sustained itself for so long if it had not been for the material, moral and, to a large extent, uncritical support of the Tamil Diaspora. The LTTE was frequently accused of forcibly extorting money from the Tamil Diaspora and tightly controlling the political opinion with less regard for dissent.<sup>8</sup> The interesting question is why the Tamil Diaspora is still holding on to the idea of an independent state, even now, in the absence of the LTTE. A plethora of possible reasons are imaginable, all of which must be based on a clear understanding of the complex relationship between the LTTE and the Tamil Diaspora. One would have thought, with the total military defeat of the LTTE (with the main political goal of independence), the accompanying Tamil Diaspora's goal for independence would have been rendered irrelevant. Yet, the fact remains that the Tamil Diaspora has not relinquished this central idea.

As the study will show, this is not necessarily the result of the pro-LTTE stance of the Tamil Diaspora. We argue that the relationship of the diaspora to the LTTE is complex and multi-faceted. Moreover, we point out that the quest for independence cannot be automatically associated with the LTTE. The history behind the claim for independence precedes the LTTE and it has represented many things for many people in the course of the Tamil uprising. For the present Tamil Diaspora activism, for instance, this is a symbolic reference point and a mobilizing factor that goes beyond territorial boundaries. A detailed discussion of this aspect will follow in section 3.

We also point out that there has been a tendency among some policy-makers and academics to equate Tamil nationalism with the LTTE. However, the equation cannot be reduced to this simple formulation. Various strands of Tamil nationalism preceded the LTTE and they will continue to be articulated even after the defeat of the LTTE.

In the wake of the ferocious last stages of the conflict and the unravelling of the humanitarian catastrophe in the areas inhabited by the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Tamil Diaspora politics has undergone dramatic internal shifts and allegiances. Several former opponents of the LTTE among the Tamil nationalists joined forces with those who were always sympathetic to the LTTE. Furthermore, the LTTE representatives in the diaspora dissolved their structures and partly withdrew from politics, leaving a space that can be filled by the second generation Tamils and other Tamil nationalists, particularly even those who have been traditionally often critical of the LTTE. This re-alignment of forces has contributed to a fundamental change in Tamil Diaspora politics. Linear understandings of social movements, which are very much based on deterministic framings of people's attitudes, behaviour and beliefs, may not be sufficient to understand complex problems posed by the transition processes.

In this vein, the authors of the ICG report conclude, "until [the Tamil Diaspora] moves from its separatist, pro-LTTE ideology, the diaspora is unlikely to play a useful role supporting a just and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka" (ICG 2010, i). We would like to challenge this sweeping conclusion and argue for a more nuanced understanding of the Tamil Diaspora. Indeed, we argue that the Tamil Diaspora has always played the roles of both funding war and supporting peaceful efforts – sometimes both at the same time.<sup>9</sup> While the mode and means of the struggle of the Tamil Diaspora have changed over time, the core content has not.

Moreover, the Tamil Diaspora is perceived to be disconnected from the Tamil population in Sri Lanka. In the age of globalisation and transnationalism, politics is seldom confined to territorial borders. We argue that Tamil politics has always been transnational in nature, more so after the

<sup>8</sup> The Government of Sri Lanka has always maintained that "support for the Tigers among the diaspora was almost entirely a result of extortion". In: *The Economist*, 23 January 2010, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> A similar argument is made in Smith/Stares (2007, ix).

emergence of the armed struggle in 1983. Recent tendencies in the parliamentary elections of April 2010 suggest that the Tamil Diaspora will directly and indirectly influence the island's political affairs via the Tamil parties in the future. This does not preclude the attachment and loyalty to their host countries. Multiple belongings, multiple political identities (for instance, support for the TNA/TNPF and support for the Tories in the United Kingdom) and multiple loyalties are all characteristic features of the Tamil Diaspora. This is not to say that events in Sri Lanka can lead to a stronger focus on the political identity of being a Tamil in the first place.

The politically active Tamil Diaspora community reflects the same cleavages, political and social divisions that exist in Sri Lanka and cannot be disassociated from that context. We argue that the Tamil Diaspora formation is dynamic and fluid and has undergone many phases of internal and external emancipation processes and is still involved in a radical review and restructuring process. The total military victory of the Sri Lankan government can be characterized as a tipping point of a change of heart in Tamil Diaspora politics. We see these shifts in political identity formations and re-alignment of forces as an inevitable consequence of the changing circumstances. It is our view that political identities are constructed, reconstructed and redefined owing to the political demands and conditions on the ground. To argue that the second generation of the Tamil Diaspora might become militant or would establish a 'fourth front' in the diaspora is to evoke self-fulfilling prophecies.

We suggest looking at the Tamil Diaspora as a rational political actor vested with interest and agency. The Tamil Diaspora will remain a critical factor in any conflict resolution effort, including those by host countries, due to its 'homeland' politics and its stance towards the domestic policies of the host, such as the United Kingdom and Canada. Given the opening of democratic spaces within the Tamil Diaspora and the currently available opportunity structures, the communities are likely to heighten their profile to a dominant global political voice of the Tamils. It will also increasingly influence the agenda of the host countries.<sup>10</sup> Hence, any political settlement of the ethnopolitical conflict in Sri Lanka will only be sustainable if the Tamil Diaspora is included as an essential stakeholder in conflict resolution efforts and their concerns are given due consideration.

Conceptually the term diaspora has also led to a vibrant debate within the Tamil Diaspora itself. There is a growing anxiety within the Tamil Diaspora that the term has been re-introduced into the current political discourses concerning Sri Lanka to divide the global Tamils from the Tamils on the island in a sinister move to weaken the political project of the Tamils and de-politicize their cause to a mere humanitarian and development concern. This is a new challenge posed to academics and policy-makers in addition to other conceptual challenges pertaining to the term diaspora.

We also argue that every new beginning must incorporate a critical evaluation of its own history and the errors of the past. The Tamil Diaspora can only remain a credible actor if it engages critically with its own stereotypes, its enemy images, and if it explores new ground in terms of new networks and strategic alliances that transcend ethnic boundaries. The success of Tamil Diaspora formations depends not only on their capacity to mobilize their own constituency and on the access they have to power-centres in the host countries, but also on how willing they are to assess their own strengths and weaknesses.

<sup>10</sup> The UK General Election (May 2010) pledges of the three mainstream parties and the party-affiliated campaigning groups within the Tamil Diaspora – British Tamil Conservatives, Tamils for Labour, Tamils for Liberals – indicate an increased involvement of British politics on issues of Tamil concern. The recent survey conducted by the Tamil Guardian (3 May 2010) among the three main political parties – the Conservatives, the Labour Party and the Liberal Party – revealed that all three supported the Tamil claim for self-determination and many even characterized the conflict as "genocide". Hence, the Tamil Guardian comes to the conclusion that the "Tamils' cause finds support amongst candidates from all the British Parties". It is interesting to note that many candidates (who stood for the general election) also took part in monitoring the referendum on the revalidation of the Vaddukoddai Resolution. For more information see "Why Genocide is an issue in the British elections", *TamilNet*, 6 May 2010, available at [www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=31693](http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=31693) (last accessed 19 August 2010).



The main objective of the paper is to offer a nuanced understanding of the Tamil Diaspora politics as it is being currently expressed globally and specifically in the United Kingdom and Canada. This study examines the driving factors, the underlying change theory and the internal as well as external dynamics to shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of Tamil Diaspora politics in the post-war era. The study aims to initiate a new discourse among policy, academic and diaspora circles by critically analysing the conventional understanding of the Tamil Diaspora. In short, this study argues that the conditions for the constructive engagement of the Tamil Diaspora for a sustainable peace have never been better. The definitions of what constitutes peace may differ but not the principal willingness to explore options for a sustainable peace. The study will also embark on a re-conceptualization of the term diaspora.

The findings of the paper are based on extensive fieldwork including interviews conducted with key figures in the Tamil Diaspora in the United Kingdom and Canada between July 2009 and August 2009, both in English and Tamil. Insights from the ongoing, Tamil Diaspora project “Diaspora Dialogues for Peace and Development” have also greatly contributed to our analysis and enriched the outcomes of the study. For the purpose of this study, popular Tamil websites, news blogs, facebook pages and chat rooms have been reviewed to identify trends.

The study is organised in five main parts: the first section will deconstruct the term diaspora and look at the specific contours of the Tamil Diaspora identity. Second, the conflict transformation-diaspora nexus as far as the Tamil Diaspora is concerned will be analysed. The third section will provide a brief analysis of the situation in the United Kingdom and Canada in the aftermath of the war and will embark on an analysis of the underlying notion of the separate state claim. Fourth, the external factors shaping Tamil Diaspora activism will be assessed. The study will conclude with implications and recommendations for the Tamil Diaspora and the international community.

Concerning terminology, we would like to acknowledge the limitations of the terms ‘hostland’, ‘homeland’ and the very word ‘Tamil Diaspora’. All are loaded with various connotations, generalizations and have been used in very different contexts. We agree that the boundaries between the home and host countries have become blurred with increased transnational linkages such as human mobility across national spaces and the de-territorialized nature of social relations and political practice. However, we want to emphasize the impact of citizenship policies, multiculturalism and other related legislative frameworks of host countries, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments on diaspora communities. The diaspora communities in the countries with long migration histories have long become “naturalized citizens”. Yet, they are still being labelled ‘immigrants’ and diasporas. This perhaps explains why, even after long years of domicile, the host and home country description can be valid for certain diaspora communities.

It would be appropriate to say that diaspora communities have multiple homes (Cheran 2006, 4-8). We also acknowledge the difficulty of using the singular term Tamil Diaspora that does not lend itself to the diversity and multiple locations and assumes homogeneity within the community in terms of issues such as political affiliations, intergenerational relations, migration history and gender dynamics. In lieu of there being no workable alternative, we have chosen to stay with the terms and hope that this study contributes towards a further clarification rather than confounding of the terms. Specifically, these terms will be used to refer to the following: while “hostland” will refer to the country of residence, “homeland” will refer to the place of origin.

## 2. Re-conceptualizing Diasporas

The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism have attained almost iconic status in social sciences. The central themes these concepts evoke are movement, mobility and circulation. While the origin and development of these concepts and their application in various disciplines followed different trajectories, in the past several years, there has been a convergence in usage of the terms. This has somewhat diluted the intellectual rigour of these concepts. In the past decade and a half, the term diaspora has become an all-purpose signifier of various modes of population dispersal. To a great extent, it has replaced and displaced terms such as “exile”, “foreign”, “alien” and “immigrant” communities. More importantly, with the emergence of globalisation as a dominant discourse and the influence of postmodernism in the social sciences and humanities, the term transnationalism has come into focus.

Our interest in reviewing the term diaspora from a theoretical perspective is to contextualise and locate concepts that can illustrate how research and academic discourses can be positively articulated and link diasporas and transnationalism to the possibilities of social transformation and to a relentless pursuit of justice, equality and human dignity. While the terms diaspora and transnationalism are increasingly used by different disciplines in different ways, we offer our approach with a few caveats.

First, we reject any concept of diaspora free of race, ethnicity or gender. Diasporas are increasingly racialized and ethnicized.<sup>11</sup> Any analysis of diaspora needs to address the gender dimension as well as the changing nature of inter-generational dynamics of diaspora.

Second, the system of nation states is so powerfully entrenched in international institutions and modes of governance that the notion of diaspora communities poses a potential challenge to this structure. Securitization of transnational movements, re-invention of passports with biometrics and strict border regulations in the post 9/11 period has vastly strengthened the national security state apparatus. We maintain that it would be prudent to suggest that diasporas and transnational mobility of populations can challenge and disrupt the “integrity” of the nation state.

Third, we would like to underscore the fact that a very significant body of research on diaspora and transnationalism looks only at migration that has moved from the global South to the North. This has a conceptual limitation of privileging diasporic communities that live in the global North.

While there is no difficulty in arguing that all diasporic communities are transnational, it does not follow that all transnational communities are diasporic. However, there are communities that are simultaneously constituted as transnational and diasporic.

If one were to adopt a broader or open definition for diaspora, that it is a sociopolitical formation resulting from both voluntary and involuntary migration, whose members regard themselves as part of a similar origin (Adamson/Demetriou 2007, 497; Kleist 2008, 1134; Sheffer 2003, 9) or as Armstrong (1976, 393) suggests, “any ethnic collectivity which lacks a territorial base” then, the conceptual boundaries between voluntary and involuntary migration and the context of diasporic categories become moot.

We do not think such broader definitions facilitate a nuanced understanding of diasporas and their transnational practices of various forms and in various intensities. Diasporas are historical and political formations that come into existence in a specific conjuncture. Their characteristics can change, metamorphose or even shed the label diasporic over time. It is not only a process and consciousness but also entails specific dynamics of becoming. However, we think it is important to underscore the experience of forced migration, associated with violence and trauma in the understanding of post-colonial diasporas that are primarily constituted by refugees and asylum seekers.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Sheffer’s discussion on ethnonational diasporas (Sheffer 2003).

Writing about African diasporas, Zeleza (2009, 32) offers the following apt definition:

“Diaspora simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse: The continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself”.

The relationship between nation states and diasporas is complex. This is one of the key aspects that can also help in differentiating diasporas from other transnational communities. The very notion of the nation state as the single most important political unit has become greatly contested. This is largely attributed to a partial loss of sovereignty due to legal universalism, free markets and their scant regard for national borders and technological advancement, which have increased the rate of communication and allowed greater mobility. Consequently, this has enabled the movement of people and flow of goods at an unprecedented rate.

Diasporas have achieved a new vigour due to these advancements, which has enabled the creation of transnational networks that allow for the maintenance of closer and more passionate connections to the homeland. “Political love” in the Andersonian sense has become a hallmark of certain diasporas. It must be noted, however, that further critical evaluations are required in understanding how diasporas play a key role in conjunction with other processes that weaken the power of nation states. In the post 9/11 period, borders are increasingly becoming tighter, regulations and monitoring abound and securitization of migration is the norm. Collectively, we witness enhanced nation states that have strengthened their mechanisms of control, discipline and regulation of the ‘others’, ‘aliens’, ‘immigrants’ and the diasporas (Nadarajah 2001). These wider societal changes have, as we shall demonstrate later in the paper, also led to a shift in identity formation amongst diasporas.

## 2.1 Identity, Hybridity & Solidarity in the Diaspora

To what extent does the transnational location of diaspora members represent a shift in orientation, outlook and consciousness? Many authors have proposed the mixed or “hyphenated” identity formation that exists within diasporic communities (i.e. British-Tamil, Tamil-American etc.). Stuart Hall’s major work revolves around the notions of identity in a world characterized by migration, diaspora and transnationalism. The significant feature of Hall’s work is its focus on colonialism and its role in the formation of modern western societies and western identity. Following Hall, it is important to remember the history of colonialism as not simply genocide or other adverse impacts on colonized peoples but also a narrative that reveals how the western character of modernity was constituted through its difference from the colonial ‘other’. The formation of diasporic identities cannot be fully understood without placing it in the context of colonialism and forced migration.

Hall argues that diaspora identities are not confined to the nation state, but inherently hybrid in character. These hybrid identities are formed through displacement, the transnational experiences and both the host and home countries.<sup>12</sup> The hybrid identity is also a relative destabilization of the self. For Hall, diasporic identity should be viewed as a “production”, which is an unfinished process (1998, 222). Cultural identity is not to be thought of as simply a shared culture of a group but rather their “true self” – an outcome of a shared history and common ancestry (Hall 1998, 223). Cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” and “being”. Identities are terms given to differentiate ways people are positioned and how they are positioned within the narratives of the past (Hall 1998, 225). Dominant regimes of representation have the power to not only construct the marginalized as the ‘other’ but also make the marginalized see themselves as the ‘other’ (Hall 1998, 225). Hybridity and transnational belongings challenge the traditional sociological models of immigrant assimilation and integration. These new

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion on the notion and articulation of hybridity, see Hall (1998), Bhaba (1994), Gilroy (1993), Clifford (2000) and Papastergiadis (2000).

modes of representations are socially, psychologically and culturally constituted but politically articulated. Transnational economic practices of diaspora communities are strongly encouraged and seen by host and home governments as beneficial. However, transnational political activism of the diasporas and their articulation and assertion of identities are viewed with suspicion: the colonial 'other' has now become the diasporic 'other'.

Yon (1995) argues that diasporic identity is affirmed in a specific location while simultaneously incorporating the global connections of these communities. This identity is fashioned by the need to negotiate difference, multiple identities and lifestyles within a specific community; the difference that is negotiated is both affirming and antagonistic at the same time (Yon 1995, 489-490). He further argues that identity formation does not occur in isolation, but rather it is mediated through multiple structures of power. Marginalized identities, therefore, are created in reaction to racism, eurocentrism, marginalization and exclusion (Yon 1995, 491).

Writing on the Palestinian Diaspora, Mavroudi (2007) discusses the strategic deployment of diaspora identity. She argues that national identities are "essentialized" at times to create a comprehensive diasporic national identity that underscores the situational nature of identity construction. Such strategies are often used to create a "fictive unity" and a strategic way in which to deal with exile, insecurity and displacement that these communities face (Mavroudi 2007, 407). This is a significant theoretical extension to the works by Hall and Gilroy, who framed identity as fluid and changing. Mavroudi adds that identities can and are strategically deployed and often strategically "essentialized" for this very reason.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Tamil Diaspora, identities simultaneously become ascribed (labelled and defined by others) and achieved (self-defined and articulated).

Fouron and Glick-Schiller (2001) provide a reconceptualization of diasporas by looking at them as transnational social fields i.e. populations as being part of more than one society. Diasporas are simultaneously socially, economically and politically invested in more than one society (Fouron/Glick-Schiller 2001, 172). Espiritu and Tran (2002) argue that the conceptualization of diaspora should go beyond actual transnational activities, such as homeland tourism, transnational social and kinship relations, remittances and diasporic philanthropy, to include "imagined" returns to homelands. For "stateless" (Sheffer 2003) diasporas, such as Tamils, Kurds and Palestinians, imagining homeland is not just symbolic but a political rallying point of identity. Often, selective memory, cultural rediscovery, nostalgia, literary representations as well as emphasis and fight for language retention become key tools in the process. Therefore, transnationalism is not only experienced on a literal and literary level but also operates symbolically (Espiritu/Tran 2002, 369). At the symbolic level, diasporic identity simultaneously becomes national and transnational creating spaces for political solidarity. It is this symbolic identity that motivated Tamils from South Africa to Singapore, from Canada to Seychelles, from Malaysia to Mauritius and from Australia to America to protest in solidarity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

## 2.2 The Contours of Tamil Diasporic Political Identity

Migration, forced migration and continuous multiple displacements both internally as well as externally have heavily influenced the notions of Tamil identity in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. During pre-colonial times, the idea of migration and leaving one's home and 'space' in search of wealth has a particular meaning in the Tamil context. The notion of space, language and landscape that are associated with Tamils and migration take precedence over 'territory' in shaping Tamil identity.

<sup>13</sup> Spivak (1988) in her seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* discusses the importance of 'strategic essentialism' for the marginalized and oppressed.

The earliest references to migration of Tamils are found in classical Tamil literature prior to the fifth century (Cheran 2008; Ragupathy 2009): *pulam peyaru* and *mozhi-peyar-theyam* are two poetical phrases that signify migration. The Tamil word *pulam* has a spatial connotation; *mozhi-peyar-theyam* means the space or country where the language shifts. The ancient Tamil understanding of migration was centred on the shifting contours of language. When language changes the space shifts.

In tracing the emigration history of Tamils, Ragupathy identifies the common usage of the terms *Eezham* and *eezaththamil* (Tamil from Eezham). It is by this term that the earliest known Tamil emigrant community identified itself two millennia ago, and continues to identify itself to this day, as the *Community of Eezhavar* in South India. It preserves the memories of coming from Eezham (Ceylon/Sri Lanka) (Ragupathy 2009). The colonial construction of Ceylon and the post-colonial construction of the Sri Lankan state as enforced national identities were discursive tools that enabled the Sri Lankan state to claim unity and project a unified face to mask the fragmentations and the resistance from Tamils and Muslims for any unifying project.<sup>14</sup>

The first major destabilization of Tamils occurred during the colonial period. European colonial powers deliberately unified various regions without paying any attention to diversity and differences, wishes and political will of the numerically minority communities. They created a Colombo-centric system that economically, politically and socially undermined the cohesion and social fabric of Tamils. The impact of colonialism also brought in a big change in the emigration of Tamils. The Portuguese religious persecution resulted in a section of Tamils migrating to Tamil Nadu in colonial India.

Contrary to popular belief that Tamils were favoured during the British colonial times, economic negligence of the Tamil regions by the British was one of the key reasons of the current plight of Tamils. British colonial capitalism was concentrated in the plantations and Colombo. The physical resources found within the Tamil areas were lying outside the economic interests of the ruling colonial powers. While the Portuguese and the Dutch colonialists were not keen to exploit the resources, the British interests were essentially located in the predominantly Sinhalese central and southwest regions of the island at the expense of the Tamil areas.

When the British colonial government decided, based on the Colebrooke recommendations of 1833, to employ local people for mid-level state sector occupations, it was the upper echelons of the Tamils in the North who were able to secure these positions given their good use of the English language – knowledge they had gained from the educational activities of American missionaries. A particular outcome of this was the internal migration of Tamils to Colombo and various other places where the colonial economy was booming. A proportion of the affluent Tamils were able to go to the United Kingdom.

As Ragupathy (2009) points out, they were able to migrate as affluent people, not because of the economy but because of the strength of education that they had received through a non-colonial experiment of American missionaries and native educationalists. Nithiyanandam (forthcoming, 2010) correctly identifies this as a

”[...] political failure [of colonialism] in the form of an absence of a suitable macroeconomic policy incorporating infrastructural investments and proper resource utilization. Th[is] shortcoming had however been fully disguised by the prolonged timeframe of colonial rule and the indirect nature of its manifestation. A closer scrutiny of the relevant facts will not fail to disclose that the internal migration of the Tamils had really been an upshot of this policy failure”.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> It is pertinent to note that the Government of Sri Lanka actively promotes the notion of Sri Lankan Diaspora precisely to undermine the claims of Tamil Diaspora. As the president of Sri Lanka often argues, there are no Tamils, no Sinhalese and no Muslims; only Sri Lankans. A group of diaspora Tamils working closely with the Government of Sri Lanka is identified as the Tamil Diaspora group and are engaged in “Diaspora-Sri Lanka Engagement Process” ([www.thesamnet.co.uk/?p=18580](http://www.thesamnet.co.uk/?p=18580)). The government also organised a Sri Lanka Diaspora conference in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, the ICG report too uses the term Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the colonial impact on Tamils, see Nithiyanandam (forthcoming 2010).

The large scale emigration without a stable economy, urbanization and capital accumulation in the Tamil areas created an illusion of development but, in reality, the whole process of internal migration and later external migration eliminated the competitive strength of Tamils in the post-colonial period.

The second major destabilization of the Tamil society was the implementation of the 1972 Republican Constitution and the emergence of Tamil militancy. The forced migration of Tamils after the July 1983 pogrom was the third major destabilization. Tamil Diaspora, estimated to number one million,<sup>16</sup> is the result of this forced migration.

From 1980 to 2007, Tamils from Sri Lanka have claimed asylum/refugee status in 31 European countries. Canada, Germany, UK, Switzerland and France remain the major destinations for Tamils. Canada hosts the largest Tamil Diaspora in the world – estimated to be 250,000. The estimated figures of the UK Tamil diaspora range from 100,000-200,000.<sup>17</sup> The UK Tamil diaspora, prior to 1983, was composed predominantly of upper class Tamil migrants and their sons and daughters who went there to pursue higher education as they were deprived of admission to the higher education system in Sri Lanka. This, together with increased discrimination in employment in Sri Lanka, led to the majority of them staying on in the UK post their higher education. After the 1977 and 1983 riots, the Tamils fled to the UK as refugees. Between 1996 and 2001, Canada's Tamil community grew by 38 percent, making it the country's fastest growing ethnic population. The majority of this population came to Canada as refugees or as accompanying (or sponsored) family members (Beiser et al. 2004). For each of the ten years between 1997 and 2006, Sri Lanka has been included in the list of "top source countries" for permanent residents in Canada (CIC 2006). Indeed, the acceptance rate for Tamil refugee claimants has been consistently high in Canada. There are two aspects that differentiate the Tamil Diaspora in the UK and Canada. Firstly, the residential and legal status of Tamils in Canada and UK differ vastly. A significant number of Tamils in the UK does not have a permanent legal status, which curtails their active participation in the society (Collyer forthcoming 2010). Secondly, as one of the oldest Tamil diasporas, the formation of the Tamil diaspora in the UK was predominantly marked by class structures at least until 1983, whereas the Canadian Tamil diaspora is mainly a refugee diaspora.

The Tamil diasporas in both countries have well-developed social, cultural and economic networks that function as powerful "social capital" in sustaining Tamil communities in Canada and Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Tamils living in Canada have provided substantial resources for humanitarian relief to thousands of families displaced from the war-torn areas in Sri Lanka.<sup>18</sup>

There are several distinctive features of the Tamil Diaspora in Canada and the UK: first, their transnational networks of Home Village Associations (HVA) and Alumni Associations (AA) are unique. HVAs play an important role in development (Cheran 2007). The Tamil Diaspora has no ownership in the nation state of Sri Lanka; hence, it can be characterized as a "stateless" diaspora. In fact, as Lyons and Mandaville (2008, 2) point out "transnational networks often play particularly critical roles in the politics of communities where significant numbers live under authoritarian conditions that limit the scope for mobilization and debate. When political discussions and organisation are stifled in one location, leaders and political processes in other locations often gain increased importance. This seems particularly important when the diaspora perceives that its homeland is occupied, as with Tamil, Eritrean, Kurdish, and Armenian diasporas, among others".

<sup>16</sup> They are predominantly settled in Canada, Western Europe, India, the Nordic countries and Australia (Fuglerut 1999; McDowell 1999; Zunzer 2004; Cheran 2007).

<sup>17</sup> For further details, see PILPG (2009, 32).

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of Canadian Tamil diaspora, see Cheran (2001; 2007; 2008) and Wayland (2005).

### 3. Conflict Transformation & Diaspora Nexus in the Context of the Tamil Diaspora

Unlike many other diaspora formations, the Tamil Diaspora from Sri Lanka has received formidable attention in academic literature. The majority of the studies were focused on the problematic features of the diaspora, highlighting the destructive potential of the diaspora to raise money through coercion or the funding of the LTTE and the armed struggle (i.e. Wayland 2004; Castles/Miller 2009; Fahrenhorst et al. 2009; McDowell 1996; Ostergaard-Nielsen 2006; Warnecke/Brethfeld 2007). These negative attributions to the diaspora in general were quite paradigmatic in Anderson's long distance diaspora concept (1992; 1998) and the widely cited World Bank study authored by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2004). In essence, the core arguments articulated by the former and shared by many other researchers are threefold: first, the diaspora contributes to sustaining and perpetuating war in home countries, second, they serve as irresponsible long-distance nationalists less inclined to compromise and, finally, are driven by a sense of guilt, nostalgia and deprivation.

Concerning their contribution to sustaining and perpetuating war in home countries, Paul Collier argues that there is a correlation between large diaspora formations and conflict. He asserts that countries which ended a civil war years ago, and which had an unusually large diaspora based in the USA, had a 36% chance of conflict recurring. This is in contrast to a 6% chance in countries with an unusually small diaspora (Collier 2000, 6). Likewise, the proponents of the New War concept argue that the end of the bipolar world order has led to a proliferation of internal wars<sup>19</sup> with a concomitant effect on migration flows to western countries. By virtue of the strong ties between the diasporas and their erstwhile homes, the transnationalization of domestic wars has increased. They are of the view that the diaspora may be "directly or indirectly involved in illegal trade, money laundering activities that support warring parties, and through which resources for continued conflicts can be allocated" (Duffield 2002, cited in Diaspeace 2009, 12). Particularly, the stateless diaspora is seen as "radical with irredentist separatist strategies", which aim at establishing an independent state in the former homeland (Sheffer 2003, 170). As Cohen (2008, 181) illustrates, "where a cohesive homeland does not exist, support for violence to achieve that goal is common". The diaspora is seen to bring along its homeland conflicts to its newly 'adopted homelands' and thereby pose a threat to national security and social cohesion in their new country of residence.

Concerning the idea that diasporas are serving as irresponsible long-distance nationalists less inclined to compromise, Benedict Anderson, a proponent of this perspective, warns "while technically a citizen of the state in which he comfortably lives but to which he may feel little attachment, he finds it tempting to play identity politics by participating (via propaganda, money, weapons, any way but voting) in the conflicts of his imagined Heimat – now only fax time away. But this citizenshipless participation is inevitably non-responsible – our hero will not have to answer for, or pay the price of, the long-distance politics he undertakes" (Anderson 1992, 13). Lyons echoes this view – albeit in a more nuanced way – and states that particularly "conflict-generated"<sup>20</sup> diasporas tend to be more uncompromising (Lyons 2004, 18-19). He asserts "diaspora leaders and organizations are often hardline 'true-believers' who operate as veto players. The cost of refusing to accept a compromise is often low (if

<sup>19</sup> This view is endorsed by other projects, such as the Conflict Data Project (2001) of the Department of Peace & Conflict at the University of Uppsala; during the period 1989-1998, there were 108 armed conflicts in 73 different locations, of which only seven were interstate conflicts.

<sup>20</sup> According to Lyons (2004, 3-4), conflict-generated diasporas are characterized by "the source of their displacement (violent, forced separation rather than relatively voluntary pursuit of economic incentives) and by the consequent nature of their ties to the homeland (identities that emphasize links to symbolically valuable territory and an aspiration to return once the homeland is free rather than ties of narrower kinship and remittance relationships)".

the diaspora members are well-established in Europe, North America or Australia) and the rewards from demonstrating steadfast commitment to the cause is high (both in personal/psychological terms but also as a mechanism of social mobilization)". Taking up the same point, Ostergaard-Nielsen elaborates "Tamil Diasporas are typically perceived as conservative and unwilling to compromise, mainly because they don't have to bear the costs and because the conflict has become an integral part of the exile identity" (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2006, 12).

Finally, concerning motivation being driven by a sense of guilt, nostalgia and deprivation, Katrin Radtke, analysing the motives behind financial remittances, points to the perceived moral obligation and states that the financial contributions are based on a moral obligation in order to get moral relief (Radtke 2004).

In simple words, transnational ties, networks, communication and politics are seen as problematic features of globalisation and migration, which exacerbate and prolong homeland conflicts. This understanding of the diaspora assumes that there is a disjuncture between the people at home and those who live outside of the home territory. It even suggests that the diaspora is less interested in the well-being of the people at home and therefore is uncompromising, radical and intransigent. We argue that this dichotomy of 'insider-outsider' seldom exists in the self-conception of the diaspora. Analysing the case of the Kurdish Diaspora, Wahlbeck (2002, 234-235) emphasizes

"[...] in the refugees own experiences, their homeland and their country of exile, as well as the time before and the time after migration, constitute a continuous and coherent lived experience. The gap perceived between before and after migration, as well as the gap perceived between the country of origin and the country of exile, are largely superimposed on the refugees' experiences by the outside observer".

As for the Tamil Diaspora, Tamils have already transgressed national borders; the only difference is that it is felt as a mere geographic one. The Tamil Diaspora sees itself as externally displaced alongside other internally displaced Tamils on the island. In addition to family and kinship linkages, both share the same transnational space in which Tamil politics has always been shaped and constructed. The nation state as the organising principle and the unit of analysis had long lost its significance as far as Tamil politics is concerned. As Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2007, 182) rightly concede "our analytical lens must necessarily broaden and deepen because migrants are often embedded in multilayered, multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind".

To say that the Tamil Diaspora does not have to carry the costs of its long-distance politics is short-sighted. It also trivializes the pain and trauma of thousands of diaspora Tamils whose family members and relatives have perished in large numbers in the last few months of the war.<sup>21</sup>

Many relatives, friends and family members still live on the island and the diaspora is not only concerned about their well-being but also aware of the possible implications of its political behaviour. The long-distance politics of the Sri Lankan state, via its embassies and high commissions in the host countries and the consequences of the war-on-terror policy have a direct impact on the political activism of the Tamil community. A detailed discussion will follow in section 5. This nuanced history of Tamil Diaspora politics and its interrelated variables is almost always overlooked in the current discourse on the Tamil Diaspora.

Notwithstanding, a few also emphasize the constructive potentials of the diaspora for peacebuilding (Horst 2007). For example, Shain and Barth (2003, 450) point out that the diaspora has the potential to act as "bridges or mediators between their home and host societies" and "to transmit the values of pluralism and democracy" (Shain/Barth 2003, 450). Christine Fair (2005) argued that the Tamil Diaspora was instrumental in bringing the LTTE to the negotiating table in the last aborted peace process, pointing at the more constructive aspects of the Tamil Diaspora. Cochrane (2007) suggests

<sup>21</sup> Several large scale counselling sessions called *thuyar pahirvom* (Let's Share the Grief) were organised in Toronto in April and May 2010. There are Tamils in the diaspora who have lost more than 80 relatives in one week.



expanding the concept of civil society and locating the diaspora as an essential part of the global civil society. According to Cochrane, this section of the global civil society is frequently unrecognized in conflict resolution processes unlike the indigenous civil society in the countries of origin. There is also a widespread recognition of the constructive role of the diaspora in development cooperation and post-war reconstruction activities of the multilateral and bilateral donors.<sup>22</sup>

More prevalent in this discourse is the more instrumental use of the diaspora. They are expected to infuse democratic ideas into the mainstream discourses in their erstwhile home countries as they have been socialized in a more democratic set-up in the host countries. It is problematic to see the reasons behind conflicts as a problem of a democracy deficit per se or to automatically assume that host countries are generally more democratic. Many scholars would argue that Sri Lanka has a democratic set-up, albeit a specific form of democracy: majoritarian democracy. Likewise, the host countries have been under heavy criticism for the security regime deployed after the 9/11 terror attacks, which is guilty of violating fundamental democratic rights of citizens.

While both these perspectives, spoilers or promoters of peace and democracy, have managed to dominate the academia and policy-making for so long, the former more than the latter, they provide insufficient evidence for their respective world views. In fact, they fail to capture the complex nature and dynamics of diaspora politics and obfuscate the real issues. The reason for these two opposing worldviews lies, according to Ostergaard-Nielsen (2006, 2), in the way that analysts interpret the world: “Irresponsible long-distance nationalists for some are freedom fighters for others”. This may be true in many cases, as for the case of the Tamil Diaspora the reasons for the often stereotypical interpretations of the ‘outsiders’ often lie in the inadequate understanding of this complex community.

We think it is important to understand the Tamil Diaspora as a rational political actor vested with interest and agency. The concept of a rational actor entails a dynamic understanding of actors, who are subject to change based on the context and the options available for them to maximize and optimize their efforts. We suggest that the study on the diaspora should regard them as people in their own right. If one looks through the lenses of the ‘outsider’, the Tamil Diaspora can be both part of the problem and part of the solution. The inadequacies in both aforementioned strands of thinking – diaspora as peace promoter or spoiler partly result from a descriptive analysis of the diaspora. We suggest looking at the Tamil Diaspora from a different angle: not by what it is doing but by why it’s doing what it is doing. All the efforts, whether financial support for the LTTE or the rebuilding and rehabilitation of the areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka, were directed towards supporting a vibrant and robust independent economic, financial and political structure and serving the overarching purpose of state-building. The likelihood of establishing a Tamil state seemed very real in the light of the swath of territory controlled by the LTTE. The accelerated efforts undertaken by the Tamil Diaspora in this period, be it financial support, political or humanitarian support, must be viewed in this context.

As opposed to many analyses, the decision to support the state-building process was the rational choice of the diaspora and was not driven by sheer desperation, coercion or manipulation. It was driven by the perceived unwillingness of the Sri Lankan state to address the grievances of the Tamils, the erosion of Tamil identity and the physical threat faced by their friends and families on the island. That said, we are not ruling out incidents of aggressive fund-raising or even extortion by the LTTE; instead, we want to point out that there was an interest-convergence, in that both entities strived for the same goal of political independence. The mode of activity, strategy and tactics therefore was very much determined from the needs on the ground in the home country.

A further point of contention is the narrow conceptualization of the ethno-political conflict as an internal conflict. This obscures the nature of the conflict and the range of stakeholders, actively or

<sup>22</sup> Orjuela (2008) takes a critical view on the nexus diaspora-development and states that development activities undertaken by the diaspora can also lead to aggravate conflicts by creating new disputes, inequality, distrust and frustration.

passively, involved in the conflict. It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the various foreign countries involved in the last war and the vital role they played in co-shaping the eventual outcome. The Tamil Diaspora, for its part, has always been an essential stakeholder in the conflict. Although the Tamil Diaspora was seen as a critical actor, it was not regarded as a partner in the efforts to achieve a sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.

On the contrary, the political activities of the diaspora were viewed with scepticism. The point we want to make here is that the Tamil Diaspora is not a rigid bloc of people driven by nostalgia or revenge, but a rational set of actors making their choices based on a diverse array of options and the political opportunity structures available in their new homeland to bring change to the situation in Sri Lanka. As Adamson (2002, 155) rightly points out, “the relationship of the diaspora to homeland is not defined by nostalgia, continuity and tradition but by the desire for transformation, contestation and political change”. Since they are rational actors, their policies, strategies and mode of activities are not static, which offers the unique possibility for policy-makers of co-shaping them.

Inspired by a systemic understanding of conflicts, we suggest using the concept of agents of nonviolent change (ANC)<sup>23</sup> to utilise better the constructive potential of the diaspora. The concept of ANC is derived from an understanding that all relevant actors must be included in the resolution-making process if it is to achieve a sustainable solution. The labelling of certain actors as ‘spoilers’ and ‘extremists’ with the concomitant isolation policy is seen as counterproductive and can end up in radicalizing and marginalizing crucial factions. The concept of ANC is rooted in the firm belief that all actors are diverse in nature and composed of equally radical and less radical elements. In short, even in a moderate category radical elements can be found and vice versa. A constructive critical and an empathetic engagement with the conflict parties would broaden the scope for a range of peaceful options.

The recommendation of the ICG report to the host governments to support moderate, non-separatist voices within the diaspora raises questions concerning its effectiveness. The moderates have seldom been the driving force behind radical and fundamental changes in conflict contexts – although the peacebuilding community still places all its hopes in the power of moderate civil society for social and political change. However, those who are traditionally classified as ‘extremists’ are also those who are firmly rooted in their constituencies, are at the driving seat of decision-making processes, have a wide network, enjoy the trust of the community and are influential. They have the potential to bring sustainable peace. In the case of the Tamil Diaspora, the overwhelming majority of the Tamil Diaspora that endorsed the quest for a separate state in the recently held referenda are also classified as ‘extremists’ since they endorsed a separate state vision. It would be politically imprudent to isolate this powerful section and disengage and ignore this sociopolitical reality. An increased communication and dialogue with all the sections and different shades of the diaspora will help to improve policy-makers’ understanding of the complex social and political web woven around transnational diaspora politics.

<sup>23</sup> “Agents of change” is the more common term. We think it is more precise to emphasize the “nonviolent” nature of this change to highlight the transformative potential. “Agents of change” is discussed as a concept in Wils et al. (2006, 59-61).

## 4. Tamil Diaspora in the Aftermath of War

The political activism demonstrated by the Tamil Diaspora over the course of 2009 is a significant transnationalization of Tamil dissent and resistance. It was also a grassroots movement spearheaded by Tamil transnational political and community networks. While the predominant aspirations of this political activism are for supporting the establishment of a nation state for Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka, there is a high degree of cosmopolitanism that prevails among the more active second generation diaspora Tamils. Several new Tamil Diaspora activist organisations were formed last year and they work with other community groups, human rights organisations, trade unions and women's organisations.<sup>24</sup> The notion of solidarity with the other oppressed peoples of the world has re-entered the Tamil political lexicon.

In light of the military defeat of the LTTE, the visible activities that took place prior to May 2009 decreased substantially.<sup>25</sup> This contributed to the speculation that the Tamil Diaspora was not interested any more in the well-being of the Tamils on the island and that they only staged protests to save the LTTE.

In reality, the Tamil political activism of the Tamil Diaspora underwent a drastic change in terms of mode, content and strategy in the aftermath of the war. Instead of repeating the same pattern of spectacular events, the Tamil Diaspora was exploring ways to become more effective through forming a strong common platform and combining the disparate efforts. While most of the mass activities were planned centrally and executed prior to May 2009, there has been a noticeable change since then in the form and the nature of the activities carried out by the Tamil Diaspora. This involves a paradigm shift from centrally organised activities to spontaneous and more unstructured events. Many initiatives and organisations<sup>26</sup> have mushroomed over the past months. The seemingly integrated/assimilated second generation Tamils are spearheading many campaigns, protest marches and boycott actions.

### 4.1. Major Tamil Diaspora Initiatives after May 2009

The post-war developments in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora clearly indicate the emergence of the Tamil diaspora as a very important transnational political actor. The LTTE or the restructured LTTE have officially declared, first in June 2009 and later in November 2009, that the "armed struggle has come to a bitter end" and that the "peaceful struggle for Tamil Eelam" has been passed on to the diaspora.<sup>27</sup> There are five major developments in this regard.

First, there are serious attempts to form a provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) within the diaspora. The elections for the provisional TGTE took place on May 2, 2010, simultaneously in eleven countries. According to the coordinator and the International Advisory Group of this initiative, "transnational government is a novel concept and has no precedents". The final report published by the advisory committee says:

<sup>24</sup> For example, Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC) works with Rwandan Community organisations, Canadian Arab Federation, Canadian Jewish Congress, Chinese Canadian National Council, Canadian German Congress, Canadian Ukrainian Congress and Palestinian organisations.

<sup>25</sup> The demonstration in front of the USA Consulate in Toronto, Canada, continued for a much longer period.

<sup>26</sup> Some of the new organisations are Canadian Human Rights Voices (CHRV), Tamils Against Genocide (TAG), Tamils for Obama and Canadian HART (Canadian Humanitarian Appeal for Relief of Tamils, [www.tamilidpcrisis.org](http://www.tamilidpcrisis.org)), Centre for War Victims and Human Rights ([www.cwvhr.org/web/index.php](http://www.cwvhr.org/web/index.php)), Tamil Legal Advocacy Project (TLAP), Boycott Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice etc.

<sup>27</sup> "LTTE officially announces restructure process: Selvarasa Pathmanathan heads the Organization", *Tamil National*, 22 July 2009, available at [www.tamilnational.com/news-flash/1512-ltte-restructures-pathmanathankp-heads-the-organisation.html](http://www.tamilnational.com/news-flash/1512-ltte-restructures-pathmanathankp-heads-the-organisation.html) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

“[Tamil Diaspora] are committed to pursuing the goal of Tamil Eelam in the island of Sri Lanka through democratic and peaceful means in a manner consistent with the laws of the states they live in. It has now become necessary to constitute a coordinated and democratic polity to advance these objectives. This polity is the proposed Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE)”.

The International Advisory Committee also put forward the following theoretical position:

“Transnationalism offers multiple and unique possibilities for Tamils in their quest for the realization of their right to self-determination and a separate nationhood. Tamil transnational politics is the logical consequence of their transnational life and transnational community networks. Our political philosophy is anchored in the ideas of transnationalism and transnational politics”.<sup>28</sup>

Second, all major Tamil civil society organisations in the diaspora have come together to form a Global Tamil Forum (GTF): a transnational Tamil civil society movement. The GTF was formed with its constitution in August 2009 in Paris and formally launched in January 2010 in London. Its vision statement proclaims to:

“Evolve an independent, international organization, which adheres to the principles of democracy and non-violence and derives its strength from grassroots organizations of the Tamil Diaspora that will in solidarity with Tamils in Eelam and other communities in Sri Lanka to restore Tamil peoples right to self-determination and democratic self-rule”.<sup>29</sup>

According to its mission statement, the GTF will, among other activities,

“use all resources available to the Tamil Diaspora to establish the Tamil people’s right to self-determination and their right to re-establish their nationhood which was taken away by force from them by the succeeding colonial powers including the Sri Lankan Government”.<sup>30</sup>

Among the founding members are major diaspora organisations such as Australian Tamil Congress, British Tamil Forum, Canadian Tamil Congress, Malaysian Tamil Congress, United States Tamil Political Action Council and Tamil organisations from European countries. TGTE and GTF are separate organisations but as GTF says “their goals may overlap and they will complement each other in some ways”.<sup>31</sup> Elucidating the relationship between TGTE, GTF and other Tamil organisations, the current President of the GTF, Rev. Father Emmanuel, said that “GTF, TGTE and other organizations are of the same mother – Tamil Aspirations”.<sup>32</sup>

Third, referenda are being conducted in the diaspora to ascertain the level of support for a separate state for Tamils. Such referenda have been held in the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Norway, Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia, Denmark and Italy. The referenda are seen mainly as political mobilization and a tool for self-affirmation in the diaspora. As a key player of this puts it “[Tamil Diaspora] needs to demonstrate to the international community and others that the demand for Tamil Eelam is not the LTTE issue. This demands preceded the LTTE and Tamil people’s overwhelmingly support a separate state for Tamils.”<sup>33</sup> The idea of the separate state and its multifaceted understandings will be elaborated in the following section.

Fourth, democratically elected Tamil National Councils and country councils are constituted in various countries where there is a large Tamil Diaspora. Tamil Diasporas in Norway, France and Switzerland have already set up these councils. How these various diaspora organisations can work

<sup>28</sup> The final report of the International Advisory Committee is available at [www.tgte.co.uk/formation-of-a-provisional-transnational-government-of-tamil-eelam](http://www.tgte.co.uk/formation-of-a-provisional-transnational-government-of-tamil-eelam) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>29</sup> The vision statement is available at [www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/content/about-gtf](http://www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/content/about-gtf) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>30</sup> The mission statement is available at [www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/content/about-gtf](http://www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/content/about-gtf) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>31</sup> See [www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/faq](http://www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/faq) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Rev. Father Emmanuel, 3 March 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Mr. Christopher Francis, 18 April 2010.

collectively and collaboratively is not clear. However, activists with the formation of a transnational government suggest that the TGTE would function as a representative and inclusive body and the forthcoming constitution would specify the modalities.<sup>34</sup>

Fifth, the emergence of the second generation diaspora, primarily youth, as important players in political organising has transformed the previous status quo. As the influential newspaper *The Financial Times* dubbed it, the Tamil Diaspora youths have embarked upon a “blackberry revolution”.<sup>35</sup> Although the idea of Tamil Eelam matters a great deal in the diaspora, home and homeland are not necessarily the one and same place. While homeland refers to a specific territory, home refers to the place of residence. Although some from the first generation Tamils would still not “feel at home” in the diaspora, this feeling is a mere emotional attachment to a particular piece of land and its cultural tradition. This cannot be interpreted as the desire to return back once the conflict issues are resolved.

The relationship to home is defined by a whole set of liberal values, rights, claims and political affiliations. In the case of the Tamil Diaspora in the United Kingdom and in the USA, these political affiliations are given organised voices in the form of British Tamil Conservative Association,<sup>36</sup> Tamils for Labour, Tamils for Liberal Democrats and Tamils for Obama. The often-stated dichotomy of nationalism and cosmopolitanism has, in the case of the Tamil Diaspora, reached a compromised blend of cosmopolitan nationalism.<sup>37</sup>

Although the diaspora is characterized as an anomaly in the mainstream discourses in both the hostland and in Sri Lanka, the self-conception of the diaspora is quite the reverse. As one of the leading opinion-makers, the *Tamil Guardian*<sup>38</sup>, sets out clearly:

”Crucially these attempts to objectify the Diaspora Tamils turns on a double denial: on the one hand they are deemed separate from, even alien to, their brethren (sic) on the island; on the other hand they are held to be different from, and somehow lesser than, other citizens of the western states where they have now long resided. Both claims, which together seek to position in some luminal zone of reduced relevance to Sri Lanka, are utterly untenable. In fact, the Tamil Diaspora makes up a complex transnational community, one completely at ease with both Eelam Tamils and as fully integrated and active citizens of western societies”.

As such, the confusion of whether this globalised community belongs to the western nations or to Sri Lanka does not exist in the diaspora mindset. In fact, the *raison d’être* of diaspora political activism is predominantly based on liberal western values and philosophies. The Tamil Diaspora thought if they would adopt a democratic ethos, it would in turn enhance the possibilities to influence the host governments. However, even the strategy of “playing by the rules” of the western nations proved only little value for materializing the pressing demands such as the call for an immediate ceasefire, opening of the camps or a political solution of the conflict.<sup>39</sup>

Although many leading political personalities from the United Kingdom and Canada could be motivated to engage with the diaspora, it is felt more as an act of pacification than a genuine interest towards transforming the conflict. While some think that the international community would be more

<sup>34</sup> Interview with V. Rudrakumar, Coordinator of the formation of provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, 14 March 2010.

<sup>35</sup> “Young Tamils Swap Bombs for BlackBerrys”, *Financial Times*, 16 October 2009, available at [www.ft.com/cms/s/2/39baad52-b92c-11de-98ee-00144feab49a.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/39baad52-b92c-11de-98ee-00144feab49a.html) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>36</sup> An indication for the increased involvement in British politics is the event held in Sussex by the BTCA (18 October 2009), in which several incumbent and prospective parliamentarians reached out to their Tamil constituencies. In that event, the Conservatives stressed their policy of action over rhetoric on addressing the Tamil grievances in Sri Lanka.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion on the possibilities of such compromise, see Pojman (2003). While Pojman is enthusiastic about the possibility of a world government as the highest form of cosmopolitanism, the Tamil Diaspora driven transnational government symbolizes the cosmopolitan nationalist blend.

<sup>38</sup> “The Diaspora”, *Tamil Guardian*, 15 March 2010, available at [www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=31365](http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=31365) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>39</sup> In the last stages of the war, with the rising of the death toll in the so-called no-fire zone and the perceived inaction of the International Community, there were also instances of violence in Tamil Diaspora activism.

amenable to the various demands of the Tamil Diaspora in the present political landscape without the LTTE, many others are sceptical.

The fall of the LTTE has led to a proliferation of new social and political formations with contesting political agendas and political philosophies. Contrary to the picture painted by the ICG, which in essence portrays Tamil activism as a homogeneous block, masquerading differences by adopting new organisational formats, the internal debate on policies, strategies and concepts has grown. For example, the move to revalidate the Vaddukoddai Resolution (VR) was heavily debated within the community, raising critical questions about the significance of this validation.<sup>40</sup> The proposal to establish a provisional TGTE inspired a vibrant and lively debate among the diaspora on the core vision, the name itself and its long-term outlook.<sup>41</sup> Notwithstanding all these differences, there are a number of issues which produce concerted actions. Instances such as these were traumatic events like the 1983 riots, ecological catastrophes such as the Tsunami or human-made disasters illustrated by the last war between 2008 and 2009. In spite of the aforementioned internal debates, the nearly unanimous response of the diaspora to the referendum process could be seen as one of these unifying moments. The majority of the votes were in favour of an independent Tamil Eelam when they were asked to accept or reject the statement “I aspire for the formation of the independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the Island of Sri Lanka on the basis that the Tamils on the Island of Sri Lanka make a distinct nation, have a traditional homeland and have the right to self-determination” (Ballot paper).

The impact of all of the above will be crucial to an understanding of transnational politics and its ramifications in the Sri Lankan, United Kingdom and Canadian contexts. The next section will shed more light on the central demand of all these different diaspora formations.

## 4.2 Right to Secede or the Right to Decide?

While the idea of establishing an independent Tamil homeland dates back to the much quoted Vaddukoddai Resolution in 1976, it became firmly rooted in the Tamil consciousness only after the many failed attempts of the Tamil moderate polity to achieve equality through parliamentary means. Even in the time of the late Chelvanayagam, the demand for separation was meant as a warning: if the grievances of the Tamils are not addressed in an acceptable manner, the Tamils will opt for a separate state. This vision of separate statehood became the central mobilizing point for the many young Tamil militant organisations. State-sponsored pogroms against Tamils in 1977 and 1983 paved the way for Tamil youths to take up the struggle for establishing an independent state. At this time the first generation Tamil diaspora became active joining hands with the new influx of Tamils in the US, UK and Australia. This activism predated the ascendancy of the LTTE.

In the struggle for political hegemony, the LTTE emerged as a hegemonic force after a long and bloody internecine fight. Over the years, the LTTE managed to evolve into a major power with naval, ground and air forces and managed to take control over a large swath of territory. Not surprisingly, the Tamil Diaspora was very much influenced by the developments in Sri Lanka and the

<sup>40</sup> The article by Dr. A.K. Manoharan on the “Significance of Revalidating Vaddukoddai Resolution in the Present Political Context”, 30 January 2010, available at [www.globalpeacesupport.com](http://www.globalpeacesupport.com), can be seen as a contribution towards this debate. Another important critique is the editorial *Varalaattu Avamaanam* (“Historical Shame!”) that appeared in the web magazine *Puthinappalakai*, 18 December 2009, available at [www.puthinappalakai.com](http://www.puthinappalakai.com) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>41</sup> There have been various critical voices: Tamilnet ([www.tamilnet.com](http://www.tamilnet.com)) has been one of the strongest critics. For example, “Addressing Ambiguity of the Right to Self-Determination”, 18 October 2009, available at [www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=99&artid=30460](http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=99&artid=30460) (last accessed 19 August 2010). Articles critical of TGTE were published in the Paris-based *Eelamurasu* and *Eelanadu* – both weekly papers and, finally, two examples of Tamil websites critical of the TGTE are the [www.pathivu.com](http://www.pathivu.com) and [www.sankathy.com](http://www.sankathy.com).

locally proclaimed independence built the basis for diaspora activism. The rejection of the Sri Lankan identity was turned positively into the support for an independent homeland. Although the sympathy for the vision of an independent state grew over the years in the diaspora, they were nevertheless split on the question of the LTTE. There were critical voices against the manner in which the LTTE waged the struggle citing, in particular, gross human rights violations.<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, some left active politics while others chose to follow the line. Over the years, the central dividing line has been the acceptance of the LTTE's mode of struggle or not; the central project of establishing an independent Tamil state, however, has never been in question.

As argued before, the vision of an independent state seemed very real only when the LTTE took over the control of one third of the Tamil traditional homeland in the North and East of the island. Consequently, the Tamil Diaspora supported the project of state-building in all possible ways: through direct financial assistance, knowledge transfer or economic remittances. The means to support this overarching aim varied over the years with varying degrees of intensity. In moments of violent crisis, such as the Indian military intervention in 1987-1990 or the four major wars between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, the financial contributions of the diaspora flowed predominantly to the LTTE. Simultaneously, the diaspora funded rehabilitation and humanitarian efforts in the North and East. In times of relative peace, the diaspora provided expertise and knowledge to support the LTTE in peace negotiations. During the Tsunami disaster, the Tamil Diaspora had not only raised a substantial amount of financial and material resources but also was physically involved in rehabilitation and humanitarian missions. Particularly, the second generation diaspora members travelled for the first time to the North and East of Sri Lanka and witnessed the war and Tsunami destruction. They were passionately engaged in raising funds from the bilateral and multilateral donors with the aim of rebuilding the areas of the North and East. In short, the means to support the overarching political project of social, economic and political independence depended very much on the needs on the ground.

While the vision of achieving an independent homeland was shattered when the LTTE was militarily defeated and destroyed in the last war, in a paradoxical way, the need for having a safe and secure independent Tamil state grew even stronger in the wake of the humanitarian disaster. The 'inability' of the western nations to stop the mass killings and grave human rights violations reinforced these sentiments further. The opposing poles of pro-LTTE and anti-LTTE have now changed into two main divisions: Tamil nationalists and the rest. The broad category of Tamil nationalism encompasses: the recognition of the Tamil nation, the historic habitation of Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka, distinct cultural and linguistic features of the Tamil identity and Tamil sovereignty. This is not to say that the diaspora is by all means a singular agent. Similar to many other sociopolitical formations, the diaspora is diverse and heterogenic in nature.

The movement around Tamil National Council – representative voice of the main organisations behind the referendum in the United Kingdom – began work at the height of the last war to emphasize the point that the Tamil Diaspora is striving for the same political goal as the Tamils on the island. In order not to disrupt the demand for an immediate ceasefire, which was put forward by the Tamil Diaspora movements at that time, the organisers postponed their activities to a later stage.<sup>43</sup> This was then taken up again in 2009 to emphasize two issues: the right to decide about the future trajectory of Tamil politics should rest with the Tamils and the vision of an independent homeland is not out of the question. The ICG report erroneously states that the main organising bodies of the referendum were all LTTE-linked agencies. It says "The referenda were conducted by independent election professionals, but were organised and sponsored by pro-LTTE organisations" (ICG 2010, 14). In fact, the revalidation of Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976 (VR) was first mooted by Mr. Christopher Francis aka Ki.Pi.

<sup>42</sup> There are several reports from Amnesty International on this issue. For useful samples see AI's annual reports, available at [www.report2009.amnesty.org/en/](http://www.report2009.amnesty.org/en/).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with TNC member Dr. A.K. Manoharan, London, 17 April 2009.

Aravinthan in August 2008. He was a pioneer of Tamil struggle in the late 70s and has never been an LTTE activist. Home Village Associations and other Tamil Diaspora organisations, initially in France, endorsed the VR. The Tamil Diaspora in Norway followed with a referendum. Similar referenda were conducted in Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. In the case of the United Kingdom, the organising body consisted mainly of individuals who have been ardent critics of the LTTE strategy and tactics including former members of the EPRLF and TELO. In Canada, a group of Tamil activists and professionals who were not part of any LTTE-linked organisations were the ones that initiated the process for a referendum. The reason for their involvement lies in the shared understanding that the Tamil identity was at stake on the island. The move of the Sri Lankan state to dismantle the idea of a homeland by settling Sinhala residents, establishing Buddhist temples and 'land grab' in the North and East was seen as a further manoeuvre towards this end.<sup>44</sup> Memories of persecution, state-sponsored pogroms, trauma and loss contributed to the mobilization of large sections of the diaspora regardless of their stance vis-à-vis the LTTE.

In sum, the Tamil Diaspora is neither villain nor saint but rather a rational political actor pursuing its long-term aspiration of self-determination. While the expression of self-determination ranged from outright secession to federal arrangements in the course of the Tamil uprising, the core of this demand remained stable over the years: the sovereign right of every Tamil citizen to determine its political future. The referenda process was both inward looking, uniting and mobilizing the disparate Tamil voices, and outward looking, appealing to the international community to prevent the further erosion of the Tamil identity on the island. The tool of referenda was carefully designed and executed to give the diaspora a space to express its dissatisfaction, resistance and its political stance. This further enhanced a sense of empowerment as they felt that they were at the driving seat of Tamil politics, at least for the time-being.

In the aftermath of the armed insurrection of the Tamils, the demand for separation has become a symbolic reference point, which embodies justice, freedom and the right to decide. The Tamil Diaspora is not under any illusion that the international community would be capable of granting this right. The organisers of the referenda also hoped to increase the bargaining power. A clear verdict of the Tamils in favour of an independent state would in their view increase the likelihood of the Government of Sri Lanka negotiating with the Tamils, even though, the GoSL has always maintained the position that an independent Tamil state is non-negotiable.

<sup>44</sup> Suresh Premachandran, Member of Parliament in Sri Lanka, at a press conference in Jaffna, 30 March 2010; in: "Archaeology sparks new conflict between Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese", *The Times*, London, 6 April 2010, available at [www.timesonline.co.uk/news/world/asia/article7088337.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/news/world/asia/article7088337.ece) (last accessed 19 August 2010).



## 5. External Factors Shaping Tamil Diaspora Activism

Diaspora activism is not only a result of internal mobilization but also simultaneously fashioned by a number of external factors such as the sociopolitical environment in the hostland and the diplomatic leverage of the Sri Lankan state to pressure the host governments to either curb or promote certain activities of the diaspora.

### 5.1 Hostland Factors: Impact of Securitization & Proscription on Diaspora Activism

A new paradigm of power has emerged since the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA. The emergence of 'Homeland Security', 'National Security' and 'Fortress Europe' as major ideologies and practices has serious consequences for diasporas and transnational populations. In a security-dominated paradigm, diaspora communities are often viewed as breeding grounds for terrorism. A Canadian government document, for instance, notes that:

"Most terrorist activities in Canada are in support of actions elsewhere linked to homeland conflicts. These activities include providing a convenient base for terrorist supporters and may involve using the refugee stream to enter Canada, or immigrant smuggling. In recent years, terrorists from different international terrorist organizations have come to Canada posing as refugees".<sup>45</sup>

Similar sentiments have been expressed by some politicians, law enforcement officers and policy-makers.<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that governments encourage transnational economic practices of diasporas while transnational political and social activities are viewed with suspicion. The notion that diaspora communities automatically represent security threats and therefore are appropriate targets for law enforcement attention seems to be predominant. While governments and communities themselves try to dispel this connection, the actions and racial profiling by law enforcement and security agencies often exacerbate these unfounded assumptions. Refugees and other non-citizens are particularly vulnerable in the terrorism discourse.<sup>47</sup> The fear that newcomers may hold sympathies for rebels fighting against a state that oppressed them also prevails in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Hence, diaspora communities, especially large ones where there is political turmoil in their home countries, are targets of the security establishment. The Tamil Canadian community is the largest Tamil Diaspora outside of Sri Lanka. As a result, it has faced increased scrutiny. In 2008, Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) reported that the Tamil Tigers are listed as a target for investigation in Canada.<sup>48</sup> Its annual report groups "Tamil extremism" with "white supremacist" and "Sikh extremism" as "longstanding interests of CSIS's domestic and secessionist investigations".<sup>49</sup> A number of the publicly available reports on the CSIS website purport to provide an analysis of threats to Canadian security but do so by discussing internal conflicts throughout the world in an undifferentiated

<sup>45</sup> Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), *Counter-terrorism: Background Series No.8*, 9 August 2002, available at [www.csis-scrs.gc.ca](http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca).

<sup>46</sup> See comments by the Canadian Leader of the Opposition, quoted in Cheran (2007) and "Tamil Diaspora, Move on from the Tigers", Editorial, *The Globe and Mail*, 25 February 2010, available at [www.sangam.org/2010/02/Move\\_Tigers.php?uid=3859](http://www.sangam.org/2010/02/Move_Tigers.php?uid=3859) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Department of Canadian Heritage, *Policing with a National Security Agenda*, Ottawa (2003, 27).

<sup>48</sup> CSIS, "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) International Organization Operations – A preliminary Analysis" *Commentary No 77* (Winter 1999), available at [www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/cmmntr/cm77-eng.asp](http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/cmmntr/cm77-eng.asp) (last accessed 18 August 2010).

<sup>49</sup> "CSIS Monitors Potential for Violent Anti-Olympic Protests", *Toronto Sun*, 20 January 2008.

manner, and by using broad assertions unsubstantiated by empirical research or any reference to the particular social, historical and political context to these conflicts.<sup>50</sup>

While national security measures have an impact on the rights and liberties of all citizens, there are segments of the population that are disproportionately affected by increased security measures (Aiken 2009). The Canadian government's designation of the LTTE as terrorist organisation in April 2006 has had a significant impact on the Tamil Canadian community. Aside from a generalized chill within the community, documented incidents of racism and exclusion have increased sharply (Sivalingham 2008).

While the Tamil-Canadian community faced racism, discrimination and stereotyping prior to 9/11 and the listing of the LTTE and the World Tamil Movement (WTM), since then these incidents have intensified. Those that have been reported can be seen in the Human Rights Watch's report that lists several accounts of "employment-based discrimination or harassment following the listing, including cases of employers making remarks in front of Tamil employees about Tamils being terrorist, and one case where an employee was demoted and ultimately dismissed, ostensibly because his employer felt he could not 'trust' a Tamil".<sup>51</sup> However, perhaps most alarmingly, the Tamil youth in universities and colleges have been at the forefront of these experiences of discrimination (Sivalingham 2008).

## 5.2 Impact of the "Long-distance" Politics & Governance of the Sri Lankan State

The long-distance politics of the Sri Lankan state, via its embassies and high commissions in the host countries, a less reflected upon area in research, monitor and gather intelligence about Tamil political activities and activists and thereby essentially co-shape Tamil political activism.<sup>52</sup> Even in exile, the diaspora feels persecuted by the activities of the Sri Lankan High Commissions. Some from the diaspora, for instance, stayed away from the recently held referendum process in the United Kingdom and Canada, fearing negative repercussions for their families and friends on the island. Many among the interviewees reported that the Sri Lankan High Commission in London tried to prevent activities by informing the British authorities that those were illegal or in support of terrorism. Community leaders have collected and noted incidents in which the Sri Lankan High Commission was involved. There was much appreciation for the independent political conduct of the British authorities. Interviewees noted that without the support of the British authorities many of these events would not have taken place. Moreover, there is a general feeling that the Sri Lankan state has identified the Tamil Diaspora as its 'new enemy' whose political activities have to be curtailed and banned. The new wave of arrests of alleged LTTE supporters in many European countries is seen as the result of Sri Lanka's new diplomatic policy against the political Tamil Diaspora.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of problems related to CSIS country documentation, see Aiken (2001).

<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Letter to Minister Stockwell Day", *Public Safety Canada*, 5 December 2006, available at [www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/12/05/letter-minister-stockwell-day-department-public-safety-canada](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/12/05/letter-minister-stockwell-day-department-public-safety-canada) (last accessed 18 August 2010).

<sup>52</sup> For example, the Toronto Star highlighted the activities of the Sri Lankan Consul General in Toronto. See "Long arm of Sri Lanka's Toronto envoy", *The Toronto Star*, 24 November 2009, available at [www.thestar.com/comment/article/729740](http://www.thestar.com/comment/article/729740) (last accessed 18 August 2010). In the case against Asian Tribune in Sweden, the editor of Asian Tribune admitted that he published certain reports at the request of Sri Lankan Intelligence agencies, available at [www.thesamnet.co.uk/?p=20182](http://www.thesamnet.co.uk/?p=20182) (last accessed 18 August 2010); for details and judgement in the case, see "The Tamil Group arrested in Italy say they were sent to Europe on a Sri Lanka Defense Chief's mission", *Lanka-e-News*, 7 May 2010, available at [www.lankaenews.com/English/news.php?id=9517](http://www.lankaenews.com/English/news.php?id=9517) (last accessed 18 August 2010).

<sup>53</sup> The Sri Lankan military spokesperson Major General Samarasinghe's remarks seems to indicate this trend. He said "we have won the war in Sri Lanka but internationally the second phase of the war has started. Not only the forces, but the whole nation, including the people living overseas must get together and stop this international LTTE propaganda and activities. We will have to conduct a separate operation on that which the government has already started" cited in: "Second phase of war begun", *Daily Mirror* (Sri Lanka), 12 May 2010, available at [www.dailymirror.lk/index.php/news/3710-tiger-propaganda-crackdown.html](http://www.dailymirror.lk/index.php/news/3710-tiger-propaganda-crackdown.html) (last accessed 18 August 2010).

### 5.3 Diaspora's Relationship to Tamil Actors in the Homeland

The relationship to Tamil actors in Sri Lanka is not always straightforward; it is a confusing mix of betrayal, disappointment and hope. The former army commander General Sarath Fonseka contested the Presidential elections in January 2010 against the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse. Along with other opposition parties ranging from the United National Party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) decided to support the Fonseka candidacy.

Ignoring Dayan Jayatileka's 'benign' advice<sup>54</sup> and citing "regime change" as the stated goal, the TNA attempted to persuade the masses to cast their votes to a person who was the commander-in-charge at the last "war without witnesses". Moreover, the former general was of the opinion that Tamils are second-class citizens.<sup>55</sup> This tactic of the TNA to use the contradictions within the Sinhala nationalist camp to achieve the goals of the Tamils initially did not resonate well with the Tamils residing in the North and East and with the diaspora. There were four options: boycotting the elections, supporting Fonseka based on the memorandum of understanding with the TNA, putting forward a Tamil candidate who would articulate Tamil aspirations or supporting the Left candidate in the spirit of solidarity. However, as the campaigns unfolded, a significant number of Tamils and Muslims grudgingly moved towards supporting Fonseka. Although the poll numbers were low, the election results indicated that the only districts won by Fonseka were Tamil and Muslim districts.

Similar tendencies prevailed in the diaspora as well.<sup>56</sup> It would be surprising for many to note that there has been some propaganda in support of the Sinhalese leftist politician Dr. Vickramabahu Karunaratne who contested on the platform of self-determination and human rights.<sup>57</sup> This could be seen as an indication that the Tamil national struggle has the potential to transcend from a predominantly ethnic-based to a more rights-based approach.

The dynamics of Tamil Diaspora politics changed abruptly with the split within the TNA. In the run-up to the general elections in April 2010, the TNA leadership decided to drop some candidates who were perceived to be closer to the LTTE. Due to the formation of the new alliance Tamil National People's Front (TNPF), which consisted mainly of Tamil Congress and the excluded former TNA parliamentarians, the Tamil nationalist camp became sharply divided. The division is reflected in Tamil Diaspora politics as well. Broadly, three categories within the Tamil nationalist camp can be found:

- 1) Humanitarian focus: the pivotal issue concerns the alleviation of human suffering. The relationship to the Sri Lankan government must be based on pragmatism to achieve the overarching goal with resolving of the core conflict issues taking a secondary place.
- 2) Support for the TNA: Tamil politics concerns the "art of the possible". Guided by the notions

<sup>54</sup> "If the Tamil minority, or even worse, the Tamil speaking communities were to abstain, present their own candidacy or vote for the main challenger at the upcoming Presidential election, they would certainly be demonstrating such a self-destructive tendency even in the electoral domain". In: "Tamil Politics in Sri Lanka: Time to Stop being Suicidal", 15 December 2009, available at [www.groundviews.com](http://www.groundviews.com) (last accessed 18 August 2010).

<sup>55</sup> In an interview to the Canadian newspaper *National Post* in 2008, Fonseka said, "we being the majority in the country, 75%, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country. [...] We are also a strong nation [...] They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things. [...] In any democratic country the majority should rule the country. This country will be ruled by the Sinhalese community which is the majority representing 75% of the population", *National Post*, 23 September 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Most of the newspapers including *Eelanadu* (Canada), *Eelamurasu* and *Canada ulagath thamizar* supported this position while several others were more implicitly arguing that the task is to defeat Mahinda Rajapakse. Polls conducted by Tamil websites, such as [www.globaltamilnews.net](http://www.globaltamilnews.net), indicated an overwhelming support for General Fonseka.

<sup>57</sup> Tamilnet tacitly endorsed Dr. Karunaratne's candidacy. A group of Canadian Tamil lawyers, academics and professionals issued a statement supporting him, too.

of shared sovereignty, the Oslo Communiqué and the right to self-determination, the main motivation is to find an arrangement with the Sri Lankan government.

- 3) Support for the TNPF and the Tamil Congress: Tamil politics concerns compromise on the fundamental issues of *Thaayakam* (motherland), *Thesiyam* (Tamil nationalism) and *Chuyanir'nayam* (self-determination). The politicians should “spearhead the aspirations of people they represent”.<sup>58</sup>

The lines between the first and the second are quite close while the differences between the second and the third are significant. At first sight, the second and the third group seem to demand almost the same. A closer look reveals that both argue from two different perspectives. Whereas the second position advocates a “minimalist” position, the third standpoint advocates a “maximalist” position. One other crucial point is that the TNPF accused the TNA of being the ‘stooges’ of India and the TNA criticized the TNPF for having spent too much time in exile without any connection to the ground.

While both camps reiterate their commitment to the political fundamentals of the Tamil cause and self-determination, the articulation of these claims seems to have taken two different political tracts: confederation (TNPF) and federation (TNA). Although both represent two types of federal models, the ideological and political debates around this issue have produced confusing and complex differences. These cleavages are reflected in the present Tamil Diaspora politics with increased support for the one or the other side: fund-raising campaigns,<sup>59</sup> dinner dances and political campaigns were organised to mobilize diaspora support. Unlike the presidential elections, the parliamentary elections were seen crucial for the Tamil question; the president of the Global Tamil Forum, Rev. Dr. Emmanuel, cautioned in a recent letter:

“While we hunger and thirst, frightened and threatened, our brothers and sisters within the Island have a vital responsibility to remain the root and basis for the true liberation of Tamils which will end all these tragedies and sufferings. Hence in casting their votes and electing members for the parliament, we urge and exhort them not to support pseudo-political leaders who betray our Tamil cause for liberation but to support candidates or parties who are loyal to the fundamental aspirations of all the Tamils within and outside of Sri Lanka”.<sup>60</sup>

It may be argued that TNA’s approach is ‘pragmatic’ in that it is based on the premise that the Sri Lankan government is likely to concede ‘little’ rather than more, whereas the approach of the TNPF is ‘principled’. Within the confines of the 6th Amendment, which precludes independence, the TNPF seeks a political solution without compromising on any of the earlier Tamil positions – Vattukkottai Resolution of 1976 (VR), Thimpu and for that matter the LTTE’s ISGA proposals. In the event of the ‘pragmatic’ position being dismissed by the Sri Lankan government, it is likely that on the longer term mobilisation may well take around TNPF’s ‘principled’ position bringing the local and Diaspora Tamils and even TNA closer.

Although the TNA defeated its counterpart the TNPF, given the low turnout, it is too early to predict the future of TNPF. The tension between the ideologies and approaches of TNA and TNPF will continue to dominate the Tamil politics both in the homeland and within the diaspora irrespective of the parliamentary election outcome in April 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, leader of All Ceylon Tamil Congress, in an interview with *Canadian Tamil Radio*, 4 March 2010.

<sup>59</sup> For example, the Canadian Tamil University and Graduate Organization held a fund-raising event for the TNPF on the 27 March 2010 with the title “Help Us Send the True Sons and Daughters of the Tamil Nation to the Parliament”. Trincomalee Welfare Association in Toronto, the Tamil Creative Writers Association, sections of Tamil Eelam Society and the TRO organised a fundraiser for the TNA.

<sup>60</sup> Rev. Dr. Emmanuel, 10 March 2010, available at [www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/content/presidents-message](http://www.globaltamilforum.org/gtf/content/presidents-message) (last accessed 18 August 2010).

## 6. Conclusion

The protests by Tamil Diaspora in 2009 in various cities of the world have transformed the nationalist as well as transnational politics of Tamils. Five major developments have taken place. First, in the absence of the Tamil Tigers and their coordinating capacity in Sri Lanka and within the Tamil Diaspora, various Tamil transnational community organisations and networks are emerging as key players and coordinators in Tamil transnational politics. Unlike previous organisational models, the new formations indicate inclusive organisational modes that tend to favour diversity within the Tamil Diaspora. Second, the involvement of the technologically savvy, second generation Tamil Diaspora members as key players in the organisation of protests has transformed the nature of Tamil transnational politics. This has, in turn, re-fashioned Tamil identity for the second generation. Third, a separate yet somewhat loosely linked transnational Tamil movement is dedicated to conducting a referendum, based on the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976, among the Tamil Diaspora in major countries in the global North. Fourth, a move to establish a Transnational Government for Tamil Eelam (TGTE) by sections of the Tamil Diaspora has generated considerable debate within the community. Fifth, there is a formation of People's Councils (*makkal avai*) in various countries to represent and work for the Tamil Diaspora.

In this article, we have examined the changing nature of Tamil Diaspora activism from a passive and reactive force to an active and dynamic strength. A number of factors contributed to the change: the mounting humanitarian crisis in the last stages of the war, the ineffective international humanitarian intervention and, more importantly, the defeat of the LTTE and the subsequent political vacuum created by this gap.

We have argued here that the conventional understanding of the Tamil Diaspora has shown clear limitations and gaps. The competing discourses of peacemakers versus spoilers were found to be inadequate. Instead, we have suggested adopting a more sober view of the Tamil Diaspora as contributors to both war and peace. The mode of support for the LTTE, for instance, depended very much on the needs on the ground. During peace times, the political support escalated; during political crisis, the financial support increased. Thus, it is important to view the Tamil Diaspora as a rational political actor, whose choice is driven by the interest to maximize its end goal. A nuanced understanding of the Tamil Diaspora will offer a broader realm of political options. Drawing on concepts such as “agents of nonviolent change”, the study has argued that parties and actors of all political shades consist of both extreme and moderate forces and that it would be a missed opportunity if some actors were isolated, controlled or securitized, just because they are classified as extremists. This again would foreclose doors to engage with them constructively in achieving a sustainable peace in their respective homelands.

This article also critically engages a number of assumptions and hypotheses upon which contemporary research and policy papers on the Tamil Diaspora are based. The main hypothesis, that the Tamil Diaspora would support the separatist agenda and by extension the LTTE ideology, has been found to reflect a linear understanding of social movements, ignoring the underlying factors and the symbolic relevance of this quest. This article suggests that the core aspect behind this demand is rooted in the liberal democratic tenet of the right to decide one's own political affairs. Moreover, it challenges the equation: self-determination equals pro-LTTE and offers a more nuanced understanding of the Tamil Diaspora activism. We have argued that the main demarcation lines are no longer between those who are traditionally viewed as pro-LTTE and anti-LTTE but rather within the entire Tamil nationalist movement between those who call for a pragmatic approach and those who argue for a principled approach. As argued here, this tension will prevail in the foreseeable future in the Tamil Diaspora politics and the Tamil politics on the island. Indeed, there are those who subscribe to the view that, should the ‘pragmatic’ approach fail, the mobilization will take place around a principled approach.

It has also been illustrated that the Tamil political discourse for the past several years has been conducted in the transnational space. Hence, separating the Tamil Diaspora and Tamils residing in Sri Lanka is comparable to trying to separate two sides of the metaphorical coin. This is not to say that there are no differences between those living inside and those who live outside Sri Lanka. These differences are similar to those of other Tamils residing in Colombo, in the East and in the Up-country region of Sri Lanka. Even within these broad categories, there are many subsections: class, caste, gender and regional differences that in turn determine the level of access to information and the power to influence political processes.

The Tamil Diaspora is increasingly involved in shaping the Tamil politics on the island by supporting various political actors and is sometimes more connected to the political developments on the island than the rural Tamil population in Sri Lanka themselves. All these factors indicate an increased participation of the Tamil Diaspora in the local political affairs with long-term implications for the political trajectory of the island. More importantly, this signifies the importance of the Tamil Diaspora as a force to reckon with in future. The changed political context has opened up democratic spaces within the Tamil Diaspora that give policy-makers a unique and creative opportunity to engage in Tamil political discourses both within the diaspora and in Sri Lanka.

# 7. Recommendations

## To the Tamil Diaspora

If you go to one demonstration and then go home, that's something, but the people in power can live with that. What they can't live with is sustained pressure that keeps building, organizations that keep doing things, people that keep learning lessons from the last time and doing it better the next time.

Noam Chomsky (1992, 98)

### Complementarity, not Consensus

In the urge to establish a counter-balance to the political practice of the Sri Lankan state, the Tamil Diaspora is currently engaged in a number of campaigns, advocacy and lobbying efforts. For an outsider, all these activities may appear to be erratic, uncoordinated and lacking a clear long-term vision. For instance, the differences between the elections for the endorsement of the Vaddukoddai Resolution and the elections held in May 2010 for the Constituent Assembly of the TGTE are not entirely clear. Although Makkal avai, Referenda Group and the International Advisory Committee to form a provisional TGTE have agreed to work on a joint political platform, confusion regarding conducting several elections still remains.

This is further complicated by the perceived competition and disunity among the main contenders of Tamil Diaspora politics. Although the struggle for political hegemony and leadership might be quite natural in phases of transition, there is a strong feeling among the Tamil Diaspora that the Sri Lankan state might exploit these cleavages and once again destroy the Tamil movement. Many even fear that the Tamil nationalist project would be in danger over the long term. Hence, the emergence of new political entities is viewed with scepticism and suspicion. Particularly, the perceived absence of leadership is seen as a weak point. As a consequence, the call for unity and internal cohesion has increased. A large section of the Tamil Diaspora has criticized the split within the TNA. They feel that any split will weaken the Tamil nationalist cause and divide and polarize the Tamil constituency.<sup>61</sup>

We are of the view that diversity and pluralism, in terms of political opinions and strategies, can only enrich the discourse. Furthermore, a multi-track and multi-issue approach will help strengthen the Tamil political project. The different Tamil Diaspora organisations should strive towards strategic complementarity and not towards artificial consensus with short-term duration. Diversity should not be confused with divided and 'unity in diversity' should be the main political slogan of the new Tamil Diaspora movement.

### Need for New Contextualisation

Without indulging into the discourse on what constitutes "true" values or who or which organisation is the authentic representative of the Tamil Diaspora cum Tamil nation, we would like to point at the example of the Kurdish movement.

After the arrest of the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK was forced to reorganise itself. Similarly to the heightened activities of the Tamil Diaspora during

<sup>61</sup> Rev. Dr. Emmanuel, President of the Global Tamil Forum, expressed in an open letter: "On the other hand, to our great sorrow and disappointment we are witnessing the divisions and disintegrations among the Tamil National Alliance. This will weaken our unity to speak with one voice regarding the fundamental aspirations of the Tamils, thus enabling the oppressors and betrayers to have their way", available at [www.lankanewsweb.com/news/EN\\_2010\\_03\\_10\\_001.html](http://www.lankanewsweb.com/news/EN_2010_03_10_001.html) (last accessed 19 August 2010).

the escalation of the last war, the Kurdish Diaspora was involved in a number of activities to get Ocalan released.<sup>62</sup> In Germany, many supporters and sympathisers – who conducted spectacular events such as blocking the motorways or self-immolation – were persecuted. The need to re-strategize and reorganise the work became apparent. As Ostergaard-Nielsen points out, the Kurdish movement adopted a more pragmatic approach of defining long- and short-term goals. While the quest for independence still plays a symbolic role, the Kurdish question is more and more contextualised in a human rights and a humanitarian framework. Ostergaard-Nielsen illustrates that this helped the Kurdish movement to forge alliances and links with NGOs and other civil society actors as the new outlook seemed more in tune with the core values of these actors (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2002, 196-198). This does not suggest giving up core convictions but adapting them to new situations and contexts. A move from ethnic-based to rights-based approach seems more effective.

### Implementation of Core Principles

It is encouraging to see the multiple approaches undertaken by the different sections of the Tamil Diaspora in adopting bottom-up leadership structures. Particularly, the stated intentions to democratize the present structures by applying direct democratic elements, such as including more second generation Tamil Diaspora members and women into the leadership structures, is commendable. While recognizing that democratization needs to be a process and not an end goal in itself, it is also important to start earnestly the process of change by designing a roadmap to implement these strategies. The pitfalls and initial hic-ups<sup>63</sup> of democratic procedures should not prevent striving towards this overarching goal.

### Seizing the Opportunities and Knowing the Limitations

In all the enthusiasm for new organisations and concepts, the influence of the Tamil Diaspora should not be overestimated. It is only through a sustained long-term effort that progress can be realized. The success of Tamil Diaspora activism depends on many factors, such as *internal factors* (legitimacy, efficacy, transparency, ability to form a common political platform, support from the counterparts in Sri Lanka), *outreach* (international network with other advocacy agencies, solidarity groups with other diaspora actors from similar contexts) and *external factors* (permeability of the host countries, the importance of the diaspora for foreign and domestic policies of the host countries, the effectiveness of the “long-distance instruments” deployed by the “state-of-origin”).

All these different factors influence how Tamil Diaspora activism is perceived and assessed. A coordinated and concerted effort from all these different strands is paramount for success. However, when looking into the current Tamil Diaspora activities, it appears that more emphasis is laid on the third factor of influencing the international opinion, specifically on co-shaping the international and domestic policies. This is without doubt one of the central issues that can contribute to a change in the current trajectory of Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, it is important to devote equal attention to the other factors. As Ostergaard-Nielsen (2006, 10) points out, there are clear limitations in this strategy; she emphasizes in her study “we have to be less ambitious in measuring the direct impact of diaspora politics and especially diaspora political lobbying in Europe than on the other side of the Atlantic. [...]

<sup>62</sup> See Wahlbeck (2002) for a more detailed analysis.

<sup>63</sup> In the recently held elections for the formation of the TGTE on 2 May 2010, irregularities were reported and the independent election commissions have ordered re-polls in some districts in France and United Kingdom. The number of women elected is minimal. A few of them won, as they were the wives or daughters of political activists. Some other strong women activists lost, as they were unable to raise enough financial and human resources to run their campaigns.



I maintain that diasporas seldom make a government adopt a policy unless that policy is also in the national interest of the country”.

### **Critical Evaluation of the Past**

There is a growing consensus across the Tamil Diaspora spectrum that events unfolded in the last war had required a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of strategy, tactics and approach: such as from mono-polar to multi-polar, from single-track to multi-track and multi-issue and from single leadership to a collective of individuals. The need to change the past strategy and tactics was borne out of necessity but not out of a conscious and collective process of (self)reflection. Although behind the curtains and in private circles the recent past has been hotly debated, the self declared “new beginning” is unfortunately not based on a solid reflection process. Apart from soul-searching debates and materials posted on a few Tamil websites<sup>64</sup>, there has been scant attention within the diaspora to the past in terms of assessing the LTTE’s failures and human rights violations in the last war. In order to attain the high moral ground, the diaspora has to start an open and transparent process of dealing with the alleged war-crime charges levelled against the LTTE. Every new beginning must incorporate an assessment of the past, otherwise it is doomed to make the same mistakes.

### **Transcending Ethnic Boundaries**

The Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim ethnicities residing outside of Sri Lanka are starkly polarized due to the deep-rooted ethno-political conflict and its impact on the individuals’ migration history and respective communities back home. Even between like-minded Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese in the host countries, there is little interaction. The last war has contributed to a hardening of political stances. Under these circumstances, a common political platform for human rights and peace seems less likely. This notwithstanding, we think it is vital to strive towards a broad political platform based on minimum consensus, if the Tamil national question is ever to be resolved on the island. Similar to the concept of Robert Ricigliano’s “Network of Effective Action”<sup>65</sup>, which urges organisations in the peacebuilding field to look beyond the boundaries of their interventions and better coordinate and collaborate with each other in order to be more effective, we suggest that the Tamil Diaspora develops ideas to create a broader network of effective action consisting of like-minded individuals from Sri Lanka, international humanitarian and peacebuilding NGOs and prominent social, cultural and political personalities.

### **Expanding the Understanding of “International Community”**

The lobbying efforts are still very much focused on the countries in the western hemisphere. The Norwegian-facilitated peace process as well as the developments in the last war showed the increased involvement of Asian countries in the Sri Lankan affairs. It is vital to forge links with civil society and like-minded political actors in those countries to mobilise support for a just political solution on the island.

Increasingly, multi-lateral agencies like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are involved in large scale development projects in Sri Lanka. Reports from Sri Lanka indicate that many

<sup>64</sup> There are four important Tamil websites in this regard: [www.globaltamilnews.net](http://www.globaltamilnews.net), [www.puthinappalakai.com](http://www.puthinappalakai.com), [www.ponguthamil.com](http://www.ponguthamil.com) and [www.inioru.com](http://www.inioru.com). For specific articles see: [www.puthinappalakai.com/view.php?2009111499995](http://www.puthinappalakai.com/view.php?2009111499995) – this is a three part series; and [www.inioru.com/?p=13191](http://www.inioru.com/?p=13191) – this is part 17 of an ongoing series on the formation and history of the LTTE narrated by a former senior member of the LTTE.

<sup>65</sup> Guided by the understanding of a chaotic network, the NEA is based on the operating principles of 1) shared purpose and principles of conduct (i.e. members of an NEA would subscribe to a common purpose and a common set of principles), 2) decentralized & self-organising (i.e. collaborative efforts driven by the needs of the people on the ground), 3) malleable in form, empowering of its members and inclusiveness (Ricigliano 2003, 445-462).

of their programmes fail to rigorously apply the “do no harm” principles and the principles of conflict-sensitive aid disbursement. It is therefore vital to engage with the diverse set of international actors in order to sensitize them for conflict/cultural sensitive aid policy.

### **Solidarity and Responsibility**

Although we suggest treating the Tamils outside and Tamils on the island as one analytical category, we nevertheless acknowledge the distinct agency of the Tamil people residing in Sri Lanka. There is a tendency within some sections of the diaspora to become the torch-bearers of the struggle. While not denying the crucial role that the diaspora can or should play, we would like to caution that the diaspora cannot and should not appropriate the voice of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka by denying the agency of the people there. It is impossible to represent fully the people there; they can speak, however, together in solidarity.

## **To the International Community**

### **Empowerment and Politicization, Not Radicalization**

The Tamil Diaspora activities must be assessed against recent developments in Sri Lanka. The Tamil Diaspora witnessed the destruction of the livelihoods, killing, rape, starvation, imprisonment, extra judicial killing and the displacement of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka in a magnitude unprecedented in the island’s history. The Tamil Diaspora activism during the past year has been equally unprecedented, which has led to the politicization of a large section of the second generation and empowerment of a significant proportion of the Tamil Diaspora. The diaspora suddenly found itself in the situation of representing the wider interests of the Tamil population on the island. This role is connected with a multiplicity of challenges including coordination among the polity on the island, the country-based diaspora organisations and the global formations.

Due to the heterogeneity of the Tamil Diaspora formations, the political spectrum stretches from support for independence to confederation, federation and even a unitary state. Admittedly, the section supporting independence is the largest within this political spread. As pointed out in the study, this concept of independence has different connotations and meanings in the history of the Tamil movement. The worthiness of the actors should not be accessed through the arbitrary categories of extremist and moderate politics, but rather through the actions of the parties. If violence is used to further the goals, one may use the nomenclature “extremists” to describe such actors but, in the absence of violence, the description of actors needs to be carefully considered. The classification of actors into extremist or moderate, into good or bad and into legitimate or illegitimate will not only contribute to a further polarization and marginalization but also close the door for any constructive engagement towards any sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.

### **Genuine Reconciliation Will Follow Political Settlement and Just Peace**

The ending of the war has led to enthusiastic calls for reconciliation efforts within the Tamil Diaspora. Many in the international community have adopted the dominant view that with the eradication of terrorism on the island, the long-enduring conflict has also been brought to an end. The concept of reconciliation has been controversially debated in scholarly discourses. The understanding ranges from the religious inspired notion of “forgiving and forgetting” to accepting diversity and creating an

environment in which restorative justice and just peace can prevail. It is the latter understanding that is capable of securing a long-lasting peace, not symbolic events of bringing different communities together. The recurrent cycles of violence have conditioned the local communities to adopt their own divisive narratives. This must be addressed; however, the core of the conflict remains with the constitutional and political system. Until this is addressed, the efforts to promote reconciliation will only be a cosmetic exercise.

### **Mitigating the Adverse Impact on Diaspora Communities**

Post 9/11 anti-terrorism and immigration security measures have been deployed in the west in a manner that has had an adverse impact on the expressive liberties and freedom of association of diverse diaspora communities (Bahdi 2003). These measures have promoted a chill within diaspora communities and have exacerbated social exclusion and inter-community tensions by contributing to the stigmatization of Tamil, Kurdish, Palestinian and other diaspora communities as supporters of terrorism. The conduct of community consultations and community impact assessments are necessary to address these important issues. The conduct of such assessments would provide an evidence base to assess the proportionality and implementation of national security measures including listing of organisations and individuals as terrorists. Community impacts should be assessed before organisations are listed or re-listed as terrorist organisations. There is evidence that diaspora communities with legitimate connections to civil armed conflicts are over-policed through both formal and informal means, by law enforcement and security agencies (Sentas 2009). Policing practices should be formally monitored and evaluated to ensure they are not discriminatory. Police and security agencies should develop protocols to ensure that policing does not contribute to the social exclusion of diaspora communities and that policing practices are proportionate to the aims of national security.

### **Engagement with Diasporas in Setting Foreign Policy Priorities**

There are competing views on the value of diaspora engagement in foreign policy. While “ethnic lobbies”<sup>66</sup> are criticized because of their tendency to promote parochialism in foreign policy, some also argue that it is necessary to engage with them as they are seen to have legitimate influence. We think multicultural societies, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, need to engage actively with the variety of diaspora actors to arrive at informed decisions. Viewing diasporas as a political resource would enhance the range of options available for policy-makers. Some policy-makers are confronted with the difficulty of identifying the main voice representing the Tamil Diaspora.<sup>67</sup> Undoubtedly, the plurality of Tamil actors within this community has contributed towards increasing complexity. However, it has also made the Tamil politics more plural and democratic. Instead of identifying the main organisations, we suggest identifying the main trends in terms of content and the mode of Tamil Diaspora activism. This will help to deal with fluidity in terms of people and organisations.

### **Supporting Community-based Approaches**

Inter-community dialogues must be promoted. The focus has been thus far on promoting intra-community efforts. The research on the Tamil Diaspora needs to incorporate a more community-based approach that promotes the active involvement of diaspora members in the conduct of studies in their own communities.

<sup>66</sup> For a detailed discussion on the issue of “ethnic lobbies”, see Geislerova (2007).

<sup>67</sup> Taylor and Purcell (2008, 20) illustrate the difficulties of engaging with the diaspora and state: “In some cases policymakers are wary of the risks of engagement with groups, arguing that they may not be fully representative”.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>AA</b>	Alumni Associations
<b>CSIS</b>	Canadian Security Intelligence Service
<b>EPRLF</b>	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
<b>GoSL</b>	Government of Sri Lanka
<b>HVA</b>	Home Village Associations
<b>JVP</b>	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
<b>LTTE</b>	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
<b>NEA</b>	Network of Effective Action
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers' Party
<b>SLMC</b>	Sri Lankan Muslim Congress
<b>TGTE</b>	Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam
<b>TNA</b>	Tamil National Alliance
<b>TNC</b>	Tamil National Congress
<b>TNPF</b>	Tamil National People's Front
<b>UNP</b>	United National Party
<b>VR</b>	Vaddukoddai Resolution