

Tamil Nationalist Act in the Theatre of Good Governance

MeeNilankco Theiventhran

Introduction

Post-war Tamil nationalism has developed along two decisively different lines, both of which still dominate the Tamil political sphere. One is the path of parliamentary politics, which focuses on electoral victories in order to achieve its goals. The second is the politics of pessimism, by which you oppose anything and everything and through this denial attempt to ignite ethno-nationalistic sentiments in the hope of garnering support for your cause. Both trends suffered a major setback with the regime change and the election of the new Good Governance government in January last year. The Good Governance regime's composition and its manifestation made it difficult for these two paths of Tamil nationalism to sustain themselves. The irony is that both were instrumental in bringing the Good Governance regime to power.

Tamil nationalism has throughout history used the Sri Lankan national question to serve parliamentary political ambition and elite class interests. Tamil nationalism has also been keen to confine the national question to a Tamil-Sinhala dichotomy based on a conservative aristocratic ideological outlook, and present it from a purely racial point of view backed by jingoistic sloganeering (Imayavaramban 1988; Senthivel 2007). However, the January 8th election has exacerbated the crisis of Tamil nationalism. This article tries to understand this 'renewed' crisis by exploring how Good Governance has come to overshadow the political posturing of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka today.

The Good Governance Challenge

Following the end of the civil war in May 2009, Tamil nationalism was hurt, wounded and bleeding. It gathered the energy and courage to fight back not with arms, but by other means. Electoral politics was the chosen path, and has been the only path known to the ethno-nationalistic, Saiva-Vellala Tamil elite. The march towards electoral optimism was headed by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), claiming to be the representatives of the Tamil people. The outcome of the parliamentary elections in August last year facilitated a new setting for nationalism in general in Sri Lanka.

The new government is built on a platform of Good Governance and is bonded to neoliberal economic policies. The combination of Good Governance and neoliberalism

out-manoeuvred nationalism in general. This combination found a new niche in the Sri Lankan polity by combining the rhetoric of economic empowerment with aspects of Good Governance to form a perfect recipe. In other words, the entry of the liberal democratic discourse appeared to be aimed at addressing the impending crisis of nationalism. This mix had a potent effect on the broader national debate. Sinhala nationalism was restrained through an emphasis on economic development and Good Governance. Tamil nationalism was tamed by a combination of Good Governance and equality symbolized by a Tamil Leader of the Opposition and the idea of reconciliation and transitional justice.

This new setting poses a challenge to the Tamil nationalistic discourse, which had hitherto thrived on opposition and denial. Narrow nationalism and class compromise which usually constituted the response of the Tamil elite political leadership have failed miserably throughout the history of the Tamil polity (Asvaththaamaa 2015). Running out of options, the Tamil leadership in 1976 adopted Tamil separatism as its parliamentary political weapon and secured its parliamentary seats. The emergence of young Tamil nationalist militants as a political force was a new turn in Tamil nationalist politics (Sivasegaram 2009). Tamil militant politics was petit bourgeois in outlook and riven by petty rivalry among contending militant organizations. This eventually gave way to the hegemony of the LTTE which lasted from the late 1980s until the military defeat of the organization in 2009. The defeat of the LTTE was a major setback for Tamil nationalism (Imayavaramban 2007). But the repressive, unaccommodating and chauvinistic regime that took shape in the South created the space for the revival of Tamil nationalism. On the one hand, it re-asserted the importance of electoral politics as a means of achieving the Tamil nationalist goal. On the other, the South's bellicosity and intransigence allowed ethno-nationalistic extremism to grow with the help and nurturing of the Tamil diaspora. Success in the Northern Provincial Council elections gave greater legitimacy and weight to political parties with faith in electoral democracy. This in turn made the TNA's claim that it was the representative of the Tamils more credible.

Encouraged by the electoral victory, the TNA took centre stage in Tamil politics. Its main rival is the Tamil National Progressive Front (TNPF), the group echoing the ethno-nationalistic views backed by the diaspora which appears to have become a force, at least in the Jaffna District. However,

the results of the last parliamentary elections showed the TNA as the dominant force which could not be dislodged as a major political force.

However, both the TNA and the TNPF share certain views common to Tamil nationalism. Both the TNA and TNPF banked heavily on the International Community and Western interests for the delivery of the kind of justice that they envisioned for the Tamils. Both are also in line with the general Tamil nationalist expectations and preference for the Western International Community. The values and virtues of Tamil nationalism have increasingly come to reflect those of the new Sri Lankan government, which also denies the rights of the Tamil people and continues with their oppression but in forms different from the former regime especially in terms of aggression.

To make things difficult for Tamil nationalists, the International Community insists that the TNA should work with the government. Tamil nationalists, immersed in a tradition of seeking a just solution by confrontation and being voted in by its electorate on that basis, are now forced to work with the government as well as accept a solution on minimalistic terms. Tamil nationalists were counting on the International Community to impose an international investigation of war crimes allegedly committed during the final stages of the civil war. Now it is almost certain that the International Community will settle for an internal mechanism as made clear in the recent United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) session in Geneva. The oral update of the High Commissioner of the UNHRC clearly showed signs that the UN is soft peddling towards the ‘Good Governance’ regime in Sri Lanka. This was made evident by the fact that after the regime change took place, UNHRC sessions have been less challenging for Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was even given more time to progress on the human rights front and to fulfill its international obligations.

During the last parliamentary elections Tamil nationalists tried hard to convince the Tamil people that the International Community is their saviour, and made public calls for an international inquiry into the alleged occurrence of war crimes during the last phases of the war. They argued for an intervention by the International Community despite being well aware that the International Community used the allegations of war crimes and human rights violations against Tamils during the closing stages of the war as a pretext to exert pressure on the Sri Lankan government. This pressure from the International Community was not rooted in any real concern for the Tamils or interest in the national question but was aimed at serving its own agenda.

Tamil nationalism until recently had an enemy in the name of the Sri Lankan government and a friend in the name of the International Community, which confronted the Sri Lankan government only because it was inadequately cooperative. Tamil nationalists desperately hoped and propagated the myth that the International Community is with the Tamils and against the Sri Lankan state. Following

the regime change which brought a more cooperative United National Party-led alliance to power, the International Community has opted to call off the uneasy hype against the government and demand that Tamil nationalists cooperate with the government. The crisis of Tamil nationalism now is two-fold: firstly, its Saiva-Vellala caste elite base faces attack from parliamentary political rivals and secondly, its saviours demand a good and subservient conduct when working with the government.

Other parliamentary political forces such as the TNPF, Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP) and the representatives of the two main political parties in the country, namely the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), are gaining ground and eating into the support base of the TNA. On the one hand, the post war Jaffna-centric mind set has been able to get benefits from the Good Governance regime for the betterment of the community and thereby increase the possibility of individual social mobility. On the other, there is an attempt to cling onto the Tamil nationalistic ideology. However, the new generation of youth is far more open to the possibility of opportunities and as a result, social mobility has come to supersede the emotional nationalistic rhetoric of Tamil nationalist politicians. Tamil nationalism’s cooperation with the present government, however, is against the people’s mandate and risks damage to their future parliamentary ambitions. Meanwhile the Tamil people are gradually realizing that parliamentary politics and their elected representatives will not deliver a just solution to them, despite the fact that they have almost unfailingly voted to elect their representatives since 1931.

Ducking Pressing Issues

Poaching by Indian trawler fishers in Northern Sri Lankan waters seriously threatens the livelihood of fishermen of the North, especially in the Jaffna Peninsula and the North-Western coast. This has been a burning issue among the fishermen of the North since the end of the war. Even though certain initiatives were taken to stop bottom trawling in Sri Lankan waters, nothing has been achieved as yet. Internal political bickering among Tamil political leaders is a major stumbling block. Tamil nationalists face a dilemma here: they count on Indian patronage and faulting the actions of the government of India or its state of Tamil Nadu is a risk that they will not take. As a result, the impoverished fishermen of the North are rendered helpless. The indifference of Tamil nationalism has persuaded a section of the fishermen to mobilize in protest for justice.

The people’s campaign against the construction of a thermal power plant in Sampur, Trincomalee is another instance where Tamil nationalist politics has been caught napping on a pressing issue faced by the Tamil people. The proposed thermal power plant burns coal, known as a ‘dirty energy source’, with adverse implications for the environment. Besides its serious environmental impact, it also has grave economic and social consequences. An indigenous communi-

ty is also living in the area. If the power plant is constructed this community will be displaced and their livelihoods will be completely lost. Apart from them, other residents of the area who had sustained themselves through agricultural and fishing activities also see how this proposed power plant may affect their livelihoods. Despite this, Tamil nationalist leaders are hesitant to criticize the project since it is an Indian undertaking. Some in the TNA leadership argues that since India is a friend of Tamils it will be wise to discuss the issue with India rather than wage a people's protest. Community leaders who appreciate the gravity of the problem faced by the community have made it a subject of discussion, and an organization called 'Green Trincomalee' founded by a group of social activists has taken up this issue. Following a series of discussions in small groups, it has brought the matter to public attention. Amid various campaign activities, their most important achievement was to have made the people talk about the problem. As a result, there is now a tendency among the people of Trincomalee to view the problem as everyone's problem. This awareness has advanced to the point of people launching small campaigns leading to peaceful protest demonstrations against the Sampur thermal power plant. With the people taking to the streets on this issue, the campaign is developing into a mass struggle.

The above two issues have demonstrated that Tamil nationalism is unwilling to address the pressing needs of the Tamil people due to the political considerations of Tamil nationalist politicians. As a result, the Tamil people are organizing themselves and leaving the Tamil nationalists and their leaders behind. These actions could be viewed as progressive steps in a direction where the Tamil polity seeks democratization free of Tamil nationalism. To this end, the emergence of new left-inclined political actors who are able to transcend ethnic barriers is an essential need of the post-war political reality.

Balancing on a Seesaw

The two variants of Tamil nationalism understand that their *modus operandi* is neither sustainable nor feasible under the present Good Governance regime. The TNA is finding it hard to work in the current parliamentary political sphere. The post of Leader of the Opposition is more a burden than an opportunity for the TNA. Furthermore, their leadership is also under pressure from the International Community to cooperate with the government. But to cooperate and confront simultaneously is a hard balancing act, both locally and internationally. In their local constituency, cooperation with the government is seen as collaboration with the government and an overt backing for the government agenda. However, the TNA does not want to be a true opposition either, as they fear that it will be detrimental to their chances of negotiating some kind of solution for the Tamils. The TNA insists that it has the bargaining power to achieve something significant for the Tamils. But one and a half years of Good Governance has clearly shown that the TNA is not in a position to bargain. In other words, the government is not concerned about minority issues amid more pressing matters that need 'fixing'.

The option before the TNA right now is to be a genuine opposition party. However, the TNA also knows well that by doing so it will play into the hands of the TNPF. Therefore, the TNA is seesawing between the government and the Tamil people, asking the Tamil people to be optimistic and patient.

This balancing act is making it all the more difficult for the TNPF to advance its agenda. Tamils in the North are concerned about the release of Army-occupied land and the freeing of political prisoners. The developments in Geneva and moves by the International Community are not their primary concerns. Thus the TNPF agenda based on the line 'one state, two nations' has little impact. People want more action from the government. Against this backdrop, the Jaffna wing of the SLFP is seeking to expand its vote base across the peninsula using the good name of President Sirisena, and claiming credit for actions taken by him such as the release of lands and resettlement as well as halting the unpopular proposal to construct 65,000 houses.

The Constitutional Quagmire

The government's proposal to draft a new constitution is fast approaching reality. A Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reforms was formed to obtain proposals from the public for constitutional reforms. The proposed constitution needs to address broader issues like the right of every citizen to a decent livelihood, fair minimum wage, safety and dignity at work, financially secure retirement, freedom from abuse and from discrimination based on gender, race, religion or caste, and equality before the law. It is also essential that it addresses specific issues such as the national question. As major political forces among the Tamil community, the TNA & TNPF should have come up with proposals championing the rights of the Sri Lankan people and stood for a just and lasting political solution that is broadly acceptable to all. However, neither the TNA nor the TNPF has publicly put forward any proposal or even made comments in this regard thus far. At the very least, they could have indicated what they expect of the proposed constitution. But they have failed to do this. This is hardly surprising since nationalism does not cater to the broader common good and only nourishes the base it is resting on, namely the high caste elite. Their failure to engage with this process suggests that neither party has any thoughts on how constitutional reforms could accommodate their proposals to resolve the Sri Lankan national question. This, in itself, is a democratic deficit.

Conclusion

The liberation struggle of the Tamil people is at a critical juncture and, as often, the conflict of interests of the different sections of Tamil nationalism appears to have taken precedence over the interests of the people. Tamil nationalism has limited the space for open dialogue. There is a need to democratize Tamil society, but Tamil nationalism is not ready for a democratized political sphere.

The liberation struggle of the Tamil people was waged against national oppression and the denial of their just and democratic rights. It is paradoxical that a struggle aimed at restoring the rights of a nationality to self-determination has degenerated into one that denies that right to other national and ethnic groups. It is also worrying that the struggle which sought to defend democratic and human rights finds itself violating these very rights. It is hard to believe that the failure of democratic politics in the Tamil liberation struggle should be associated with the rise of any particular movement or with the development of the armed struggle. The roots of this malaise run deeper, and there is a need for some soul searching and a serious review of the social attitudes and norms in Tamil society and Tamil nationalism in particular.

This government, like its predecessor, appears to be dragging its feet on the national question. In the meantime, the TNA which is engaging with the government, is on the horns of a dilemma and deluding the Tamil people that a solution is in sight. In spite of its politics of accommodation, the TNA has thus far failed to negotiate any serious solution to the main problems facing the Tamil people. Thus accommodative politics form one side of the Tamil nationalist coin. The failure of this approach poses fresh challenges for its future path.

The TNPF, the other side of the Tamil nationalist coin, has been banking on Geneva, the West and India to bring about a political solution. As a result, they have kept denying and rejecting all local mechanisms and initiatives for a solution.

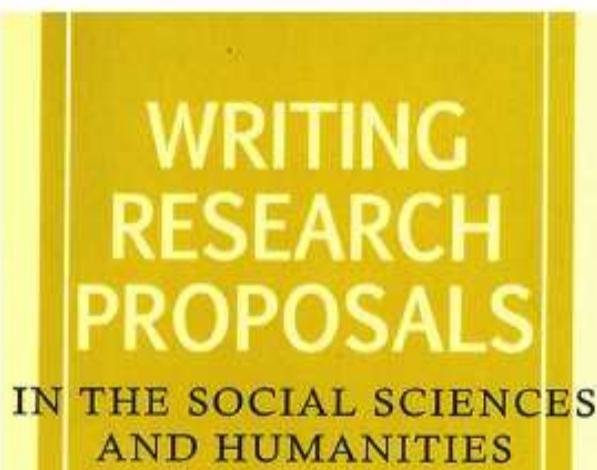
Such a negative approach based on an illusionary understanding of real politick cannot bear fruit either. The Tamil diaspora, which is out-dated and out of context, still tries to give life to an effectively dead idea of a separate Tamil nation.

The point to note is that people propagating extreme versions of Tamil nationalism (such as the one propagated by the TNPF) do not act out of innocence or ignorance. They know what they champion is not possible, but they need to keep pursuing it for political mileage. On the other hand, the accommodative side of Tamil nationalism (such as the TNA) also knows well that the Good Governance regime will not deliver, but is caught in a situation where it is unable to say so. Doing so will constitute a serious compromise of their political future. It is thus left for the Tamil people to understand the current political reality and seek a viable political alternative before it is too late.

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