

A RISING IN THE EAST

Malathi de Alwis

The East has suddenly re-appeared in the cognisance of Colombo, after Karuna's declaration of autonomy from the north, in April 2004. For the Colombo-based media the only issues worth speculating on are who helped Karuna escape to Colombo and which LTTE faction is killing whom. All the while, completely ignored by the media, families wage terrified yet determined battles in the East against the latest drive by the Vanni group to re-conscript children released by the Karuna group. This is a historic moment in the struggle of the Tamil populace in the East and it is imperative that we in the South not miss the opportunity to show our solidarity and support these courageous families in every way we can.

While I continue to remain critical of the fascist practices of both LTTE factions, I have no doubt that this latest configuration of resistance has been enabled by Karuna's rebellion. Karuna's critique that Prabhakaran, and what is now called the LTTE (Vanni group), has consistently discriminated against eastern LTTE cadres and populace, is a regionalist argument that ironically parallels the broader Tamil nationalist argument, most vociferously articulated by Prabhakaran and the LTTE for over two decades now. That is to say, the LTTE demands an autonomous nation-state—*eelam*—for the Tamil populace of Sri Lanka based on the argument that the primarily Sinhala and Buddhist Sri Lankan state has consistently and systematically discriminated against them for many decades. This envisioned nation-state of *eelam* encompasses both the northern and eastern provinces on the grounds that these regions were the original homelands of the Tamil people. Karuna's demands merely extends this argument by calling for a bi-furcation of the North and East which thus enables the East to function independently of the North. Following such regionalist logic, it is only a matter of time before Tamils in Trincomalee, who argue that they are positioned even further down in the pecking order from the Tamils in Batticaloa, seek autonomy as well.

Karuna's complaint about northern discrimination is not a new one or unique to him. During my regular visits to the Eastern Province, these past five years, I had begun to notice this refrain getting louder and louder, the more people began to trust me. A weeping widow would confide that she did not know whether her son was alive or dead because she had not heard from him for over five years, ever since he had been sent off to the Vanni. "Why couldn't 'they' let him serve closer home", she would keep asking, "knowing that he is all I have?" Local peace activists would be more explicit noting darkly that more eastern 'boys' had sacrificed their lives for *eelam* than northern ones. Conversely, a northerner who had decided to take up residence in the East when faced with the incompetence of an easterner would mutter: "these guys would be nowhere if we had not come along and started NGOs and teaching in their university".

Not surprisingly, Karuna's declaration of independence has exacerbated what had previously been mere murmurings and rumblings of discontent. The populace in the East is split into those who are delighted that it has finally been articulated in public in such a dramatic and defiant manner and those who feel that it has led to unnecessary and unfortunate divisions within the community and the liberation movement as a whole (and of course many a variation between the two positions as well).

Besides the intra-LTTE battles and assassinations/counter-assassinations that this declaration has triggered, northerners also point to another significant outcome. Many of them no longer feel welcome or safe in the East and some have actually been asked to leave the East. It is still unclear how many families have actually returned to the North as the numbers increase or decrease based on which side one seeks to support. This is sadly reminiscent of another event of more tragic and gargantuan proportions. In October 1990, Muslims long domiciled in the North were chased out by the LTTE, with barely a few hour's notice. The easterners appear as the villains in the hegemonic narrative of this exodus as well. Such closeness was shared by the Tamils and Muslims of the North that LTTE cadre from the East had to be brought in to drive out the Muslims.

However, what I consider to be the most crucial outcome of Karuna's rebellion, an outcome that has been most consistently ignored by those in the South unfortunately, is that it also provided an unexpected space for parents to vent their anger against both LTTE factions, and reclaim their children. On April 10th, parents who had got word that Karuna was considering releasing most of his child combatants (prior to a possible battle with the Vanni group), went to the Meenaham training camp to claim their children. When Karuna's middle-level cadre started stalling, a large group of parents, and most significantly many mothers, became incensed. They set up a road block outside the camp and proceeded to beat up some of the LTTE cadre with bicycles and whatever else they could get their hands on until their children were released.

It is this collective act of resistance that catalysed the mass release of children from the rest of Karuna's training camps, on April 11th. Children poured out of these camps in their hundreds and thousands, throwing their rifles into the jungle, laughing and joking, jumping onto buses and cadging lifts from whatever vehicles they could stop so that they could get home as soon as possible. This was so unexpected that humanitarian aid organizations in the East are still unclear how many children were actually released that day as they were so ill prepared to adequately tabulate this magical exodus.

When the LTTE (Vanni group) began capturing children who had been released by the LTTE (Karuna group) or had surrendered to them, another group of parents stormed their camp in Kathiravelly, on April 13th, blocking the road with logs and branches and abusing senior cadre. Ironically, it was the subsequent release of children from this camp that earned encomiums for the LTTE (Vanni group) from UNICEF and BBC, neither group mentioning the pivotal role that had been played by parents (see UTHR Bulletin 36 for a scathing commentary on this lapse). But the memory of their heroism continues to strengthen the resolve of parents. One mother who recounted, with flashing eyes and dramatic gestures, how she flung branches to block the road swore: "I will not let my daughter go again as long as I have any breath left in this body".

This is the first time in the history of the Tamil liberation struggle that parents have stormed LTTE camps, en masse, and been able to take possession of their children as well as get all the other children released. The fact that they actually beat up LTTE cadre is even more extraordinary (one severely beaten woman LTTE cadre [Karuna group] had been so shaken by this encounter that she left the movement soon after). What is the reason for this dramatic shift?

For the past several years, Karuna and the eastern LTTE cadre had systematically carried out the mass conscription of children through extortion and force, as has been well documented by UTHR. With these horrific memories fresh in their minds, the parents were now trying to ensure that Karuna would follow through with his signal that he was no longer willing to go along with the exploitative relationship he shared with the northern leadership. In addition, it was becoming clear that the two LTTE factions were getting ready for a major showdown and the parents had no intention of seeing their children becoming cannon fodder in a battle for supremacy rather than one for the liberation of the Tamil people.

It is this kind of reasoning that has also given the parents courage to repeatedly ignore the Vanni group's announcements that they should attend meetings, and quickly destroy personalized letters they have received ordering them to hand over their children on specified dates (the recent Human Rights Watch statement also refers to this). Even those who did attend the meetings called by the Vanni group were bold enough to assert quite adamantly and in public that they do not wish to give their children back and nor do their children wish to return to the LTTE.

Not surprisingly, such resistance has greatly perturbed the Vanni group and they have sought to divide and conquer by promising monetary rewards to those who are willing to reveal which parents are hiding their children and where. Similarly, young girls who were quickly married off in the hopes of attaining some sort of protection or waiver have been asked to return along with their husbands (be they LTTE cadre or not) and offered Rs. 5000 as a reward for their compliance.

As the Vanni group is gradually decimated in the East by the Karuna group's calculated guerrilla attacks and assassinations, they have also begun to use more violent means to re-conscript such as assassinating children who have been sent away to safe houses, abducting children on their way to school, and re-starting night time visits to individual homes—oftentimes burning down homes, threatening parents and beating them senseless when they have refused to give up their children.

It is clear that the space for resistance that had opened up in April 2004 is fast dwindling, in the face of this latest onslaught by the Vanni group. However, what is heartening is that it is also clear that parents are determined to not give up hope and continue to seek every means possible to retain their children with them. Their resolve is further strengthened by the fact that they now actually have their children with them, to feed and fondle and just feast their eyes upon. Previously, the LTTE strategy was to dissipate their efforts to reclaim their offspring by promising them sporadic opportunities of visiting the camps to just catch a glimpse of their children or sending money so that their children would have a few comforts, such as a pillow and mat to sleep on, in the training camps.

Parents are mortgaging land and getting into debt so that they can send their children off to Colombo or India or the Middle East. Others who are even more destitute are desperately seeking the assistance of any humanitarian or UN agency that may be able to offer their children some protection. Yet, they also remain aware that "whatever piece of paper that is issued to our child (noting that the child has been returned voluntarily and cannot be re-conscripted) by UNICEF will be spat on by the LTTE as soon as their [UNICEF's] back is turned." In fact, one family which had requested that UNICEF intercede on their behalf, at their weekly meetings with the LTTE (Vanni group), noted that the intimidation had subsequently increased.

Interestingly, the ineffectuality of these international organizations seems to be what is also spurring these parents to form their own little groups, with the help of some extremely dedicated and committed local peace activists. These groups seek to keep themselves informed of which villages and families are being targeted by the LTTE (Vanni group), how effective or ineffective UNICEF has been in interceding on behalf of individual families, and whether they can come up with some collective strategies to thwart the re-conscription of their children. Efforts are also underway to involve the entire village so that this strategizing can move beyond individual interests and concerns. Or to put it another way, the brutalized peasants of the East are not 'potatoes in a sack', each family a single entity. Nor do these families always need to be represented, they can also represent themselves, when the need arises.

The formation of groups of families and village collectives is a very hopeful sign as all other humanitarian efforts have tended to individualize children and families. Be it in terms of protection,

intimidation, rehabilitation, re-schooling or vocational training, each child is constituted as a separate case. This has also led to a lot of friction within village communities. Those who bartered away all their possessions to the LTTE in order to keep back their children or those whose children are still languishing in a camp in the Vanni are resentful of the undue attention being showered upon the recently released child combatants, by NGOs and INGOs. The wistful comment of a little boy watching a young girl recently

released by the Karuna group riding a bicycle that had been gifted to her by an INGO particularly epitomises this disjuncture: "If I had joined the LTTE I could have got a bike like that too." This is not conducive to producing an environment for collective resistance. The kind of 'capacity building' we need in this country is the support and encouragement of more such collectives for that is the only way resistance can be strengthened and sustained. ■

Malafhi de Alwis is Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo.

INDIAN ELECTIONS: A DEMONSTRATION FOR SOUTH ASIA

Rajan Philips

The BJP's surprising defeat and the smooth transfer of power to a new government of the United Progressive Alliance, with Manmohan Singh as India's first Sikh Prime Minister, have wider implications in the South Asian region. Apart from foreign policy and regional security implications, the Indian elections are also of politically demonstrative significance for all South Asian countries. Unlike most or all of its neighbours, India has been steadfast in its adherence to constitutional democracy. Among India's six South Asian neighbours, only Sri Lanka has held regular elections throughout the post-colonial period, but even Sri Lanka has become notorious for monkeying with its constitution. The recent elections demonstrate India's democratic depth, its reasonably successful transition from dominant-party governance to alliance-based governance, the electoral power of India's poor in challenging the presumptuous march of globalism, and the people's rejection of the BJP's persistent and systematic efforts to undermine the tradition of Nehruvian secularism.

"The Congress is the country and the country is the Congress", declared Jawaharlal Nehru in 1953, six years after India's independence. If it was inevitable that the Congress Party should eventually implode, it was also inevitable that the upshot of its disintegration would be the lack of an all-India replacement to it. And it has been so. Neither the present Congress nor the BJP can pretend to be a national party as the old Congress was. Regional parties have emerged to fill the void, and even parties with a national outlook, like the CPM, have become reliant on their regional bases. A single-party majority is no longer achievable, even without a proportional representation system as in Sri Lanka, and the Indian politicians have been forced to forming alliances to provide stable governance at the centre and in the states. Prime Minister Vajpayee, an enigmatic lone ranger on the right, has been particularly successful in forming and maintaining governing alliances. In him, the BJP found a moderate magnet to attract those disenfranchised

with the decadent Congress, but who otherwise would have been repelled by the BJP's extreme Hindu nationalism.

The Congress and other secular political parties finally learnt the lesson of forming alliances and have now beaten the BJP at its own game. But to succeed as a government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other Congress leaders will need all the political savvy given their inexperience in managing coalition governments. It is remarkable that the Congress accounts for only 147 seats, just over a quarter of the total Lok Sabha seats. Their pre-poll allies bring up the seat tally to 217, still below the half-way mark for a majority and making them depend on the Left Democratic Front for a secure parliamentary majority. The CPM continues to be puritanical in refusing to be part of the new government and the cabinet, but there is no mistaking the Left's resolve to provide a stable and secular alternative to the BJP. The Common Minimum Programme of the governing alliance is at least an indication of the new government's seriousness in identifying and facing what should be its most fundamental challenge in the light of the voters' rejection of the BJP. The same challenge is also confronting other South Asian countries, and it is the challenge of reconciling the imperatives of a global economy that selectively favours only a small section of the population, on the one hand, and the cultural and economic existential needs of others who constitute the majority, on the other.

The *Hindutva* movement in India, and its minuscule *Sinhalatva* imitation in Sri Lanka, are in favour of marrying unbridled global capitalism with a narrowly defined national culture, particularly religion. The two movements derive much of their sustenance from the materially prospering urbanites and the culturally alienated expatriates, neither of whom have any interest in or link to the mass of the urban and rural poor. Nor do they suffer any compunction in championing, on the one hand, Hindu or Buddhist nationalism, as the case may be, and supporting the current lopsided American policy in the Middle East under the most overtly