

Life after extinction

The future of the LTTE

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THE DEFEAT of the Tamil Tigers over the past few months has been as dramatic as it has been decisive. The world stood witness to the spectacle of the formidable Tigers, who once looked inextricably linked with Sri Lanka's past and future, crumbling beneath the inexorable pressure put on them by the Sri Lankan state. That the Tigers would face severe difficulties was clear three months ago when their top leadership was decimated and it no longer controlled any territory. But some recent events and trends have pushed them even further into oblivion. It is increasingly evident that even though the Tamil Tigers' cause may still have resonance among the Tamils at home and abroad, a strategy of reviving the Tigers' fortunes is highly elusive.

The controversial arrest of their new chief Kumaran Pathmanathan (KP) has left the Tigers rudderless. Formerly the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) chief fundraiser and arms supplier, he was indisputably the most senior leader alive. His arrest is controversial and significant for a host of reasons. Despite his obvious stature and contribution to LTTE, KP was not a unanimous choice for the top leadership. By confirming Velupillai Prabhakaran's death and by espousing a more moderate and political approach towards achieving self determination for Tamils, he had alienated the hardliners in the LTTE and significant sections of the Tamil diaspora. There are suggestions that one of his rivals betrayed KP, which led to his arrest. If this is indeed the case, it reflects an extremely bitter feud within the LTTE

senior leadership and dissonance among the Tamil diaspora--the last thing the Tigers need in this most difficult of circumstances.

KP's arrest in South-east Asia should deeply trouble the Tigers for more reasons. It reflects the urgency and single minded commitment of the Sri Lankan state for hunting down operatives, even outside Sri Lanka. The Tigers have achieved historical notoriety for their international network spread in dozens of countries. Tiger leaders as well as sympathisers may rethink their commitment to the LTTE cause and may no longer feel as safe as they once felt in whichever country they reside in.

The episode will demoralise the Tigers for another reason. Besides being perceived to hold the key to the Tigers' much publicised but rarely disclosed wealth, KP had many contacts among diplomats, police and intelligence officials. This allowed him to work for the LTTE in many countries without fear of detection or detention. Once KP is subjected to severe interrogation, he might expose the collusion of many countries in the LTTE cause.

Faced with strong incontrovertible evidence, the "exposed" countries may well decide to go after the LTTE operatives and organisations which the Sri Lankan state claims are now operating in their countries. This will be bad news for a terrorist group whose sole hope of survival rests with the powerful Tamil diaspora. KP recognised the same when he spoke of a "provisional transnational government of Tamil Eelam."

President Mahinda Rajapakse has shown himself to be a ruthless leader who would do anything to eliminate the Tigers from resurfacing in any form. His strategy in the coming months and years will significantly determine the Tigers' fortunes as well as the future of the Sri Lankan state in general. Mr Rajapakse has proven to be a crafty strategist and has successfully taken the global community's help in eliminating the LTTE. This was evident during the active war with the LTTE when he astutely garnered the support of India, China and Pakistan. More importantly, KP's arrest in a South-east Asian country buttresses the international support garnered by the Sri Lankan president. Despite symbolic protests by the international community, Mr Rajapakse does not appear to be globally isolated and is still revelling in the aftermath of a historic victory.

Yet for all the euphoria surrounding the defeat of the Tigers, it would be premature to write them off yet. As long as Mr Rajapakse does not work to eliminate the core reasons for Tamil disillusionment, there is always the possibility of a dramatic reversal of fortunes for the Tigers. In an election

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recently held in post-war Sri Lanka, the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) emerged as the largest party in the Vavuniya Municipal Council and the second largest party in the Jaffna urban council. It is easy to dismiss these elections as local elections and consequently irrelevant. But they do reflect rising resentment among the Tamils which could later translate into increased support for the beleaguered Tigers. Mr Rajapakse's emerging strategy may well explain the reasons for their discontent.

Mr Rajapakse had earnestly promised devolution of power to the Tamils once the Tigers were militarily defeated. Months after the defeat, the government has made a radical departure from this stand by relegating the devolution until after the Presidential elections. The president's United

People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) swept to an easy victory in the Uva Provincial Council elections in the South. The government may well be riding on euphoria among the Sinhalese majority and would benefit from a "tough" stance against the Tamils in the run up to the elections. Even Mr Rajapakse's allies within the government may not be too keen on "devolution." This strategy would not go down well with the Tamils and may provoke disillusionment.

Another factor that continues to provoke international outrage is the conditions of the more than 250,000 Tamil refugees who languish in appalling conditions in make-shift camps. There is considerable international pressure on Colombo to ensure that a majority of them be resettled before the year end. But Mr Rajapakse does not appear to be in any visible hurry over this issue. He doesn't appear to be too bothered about global concerns about their welfare. This might turn out to be his biggest strategic blunder yet. A swift return to normalcy in their conditions is necessary to prevent boiling resentment among the Tamil diaspora. Even more worrying is the undeniable

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animosity being felt by the Tamils who have been confined for months in abominable conditions. The "screening" of Tigers among the Tamils in these camps needs to be carried out urgently. This will reduce the risk of the confined Tamils---a vast majority of who are innocent and moderate---might end up supporting the Tigers in a cause which they would have previously rejected. It is this anger at being discriminated against by the Sinhalese majority which led to this conflict in the first place and Mr Rajapakse should do his utmost to avoid replicating the same breeding grounds for terrorism.

The Tigers face an extremely daunting and largely uncertain future. They have been militarily destroyed and their top leadership has been eliminated. On the other hand they still have im-

pressive propaganda, fundraising and procurement infrastructure overseas. KP's arrest might look like the end of the Tigers. But it could possibly be looked at by Tiger hardliners as an end to what they considered as an unlikely moderate path for the LTTE. Mr Rajapakse has violently eliminated the Tigers and now has to guard against unbridled optimism. He has to ensure that he does not get caught up in petty political gains and sees the larger picture of Sinhala-Tamil reconciliation. Whether the president indeed fulfils the

promise of integrating Tamils into the political process and granting them political autonomy is crucial to achieving a lasting solution. Unless the root causes for Tamil discontent are addressed holistically, the Tigers will be lurking in the background.

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