

# National referendums and the aspirations of a diaspora: a Saturday morning reflection

Wednesday 23 December 2009, by [WEERAWARDHANA Chaminda](#) (Date first published: 19 December 2009).

A week ago (Saturday 12 December 2009), I came across a news report about a referendum organised by Tamil nationalist activists in France, in order to [quote] say yes or no for independent and sovereign Tamil Eelam in the island of Sri Lanka [unquote]. The article, published in Tamilnet, further said that polling was to take place in 30 centres in Paris and suburbs and in five centres out of Paris. A so-called [quote] Formation committee for the country council of Eelam tamils in France [unquote] was mentioned as the chief organisers of the referendum, supported by [quote] 61 Eezham Tamil organisations and two NGOs in France [unquote].

This is not the first occasion that a referendum of this nature has been organised. A similar event held in Norway was given relatively substantial publicity back in May 2009. At a first glance, it appears that the idea of referendums on Tamil Eelam was developed by diaspora Tamil nationalists, i.e. Tamil nationalist hardliners who continue to support the concept of Tamil Eelam (a separate state for ethnic Tamils in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka). Referendums on Tamil Eelam seem to be used that has come to being in the aftermath of the decimation of the LTTE, which culminated in the assassination of all its senior leaders including supremo VP.

It may be easy enough to guess who organises these referendums, but reading the Tamilnet article this morning, I was struck by one question: what are they expecting to achieve through them? It is true that events of this nature enable them to make their voice heard locally (i.e. within the countries where they are based). Even that publicity tends to be largely marginal, as the Sri Lankan question does not constitute a key foreign policy or strategic priority to many of the Western states with large Tamil communities. Nonetheless, looking through Facebook and elsewhere, I noticed a sense of tremendous enthusiasm among young diaspora Tamils over today's referendum in France. The thoughts that follow largely concern this group of energetic youngsters, their 'diasporic' politics and the future ahead of them....and us.

There is one group that tends to capitalise on referendums or any other events organised by hardline Tamil nationalist groups: local politicians in each country. In effect, some local politicians seem to notice the advantages of courting the nationalist hardliners of the Tamil diaspora, as increasingly large numbers of its members are part of their local electorates. This is especially relevant with regards to the second generation; youngsters of Tamil origin are native speakers of the local language, are brought up in the local culture, and their citizenship functions as an asset they can use in voicing their positions on Tamil nationalism. A few weeks ago, I came across an interview with Jan Jananayagam, British Tamil banking professional cum aspiring politician. In explaining her views on diaspora youth and Tamil nationalism, she notes that being fully part and parcel of the local society provides them with added leverage to pick up a phone, call their local MPs and put their concerns forward. Some local politicians do seem to show an interest in garnering the support of Tamil vote banks in their respective electorates.

I find the current operational dynamics of hardline diaspora Tamil nationalism considerably worrying, as their strategies are near pointless. Despite efforts to express their concerns through pacific measures such as locally organised referendums, it is more than crystal-clear that such

steps are only reminiscent of the Sinhalese saying *Palu gé valan bindinava* (literally 'breaking pots and pans in an abandoned house'). Events of this nature also seem to serve a purely 'psychological' purpose, which Dr. Dayan Jayatilika describes as 'the emotional gratification of the Tamil diaspora' (referring to hardline Tamil nationalism in the Tamil diaspora in one of his numerous submissions to GV, especially during his ambassadorial tenure in Geneva). While teaching several smart young French Tamil undergraduates in the recent past, one observation painfully struck me: they (especially those harbouring hardline nationalist – separatist positions) all have a very strong sense of affection to their country of origin, that island nation they have heard a lot about, that many of them (or probably the majority of them) have never been to, never experienced in real life. In many cases, their deeply-felt desire to engage themselves in Tamil nationalist activism is indeed a product of their imaginaire, built and shaped by the experience of growing up with exiled parents, in the middle of two worlds – that of their parents and the world 'out there'. Their upbringing has made them extremely sensitive to 'Sri Lanka', which they view through the prism of what they have heard from their folks at home, what they hear around them, what they read, and the overall ideas, influences and individuals that condition their perceptions of the island.

For a Sri Lankan and a Sinhalese in particular, who is willing to talk to any interest group irrespective of their ideological positions on the ethnic question, talking to young diaspora Tamils can often be a simultaneously heart-touching and somewhat frustrating experience. Their views of the Sinhalese community are generally marked by a high level of negativity. Some of them do have friends from the Sinhalese diaspora, but little interactive discussion seems to take place among them. Last summer, a group of young Tamil protestors at Parliament Square (London UK) told me that after nightfall, Sinhalese youth would drive around Parliament Square, shouting abuse at them, and at times throwing bags of waste. Two years ago, a brilliant French Tamil student of mine with deep affections to Tamil Eelam, explained how she dreamt of going to Sri Lanka after a degree in Business Studies to start her own firm there. Another student who did an in-class exposé (oral presentation) on Sri Lanka ended her rendering with a hope for 'Tamil independence'.....Another young lady, who had visited Sri Lanka for the first time at the age of 19, saw herself settled down in northern Sri Lanka after the conflict – under 'their' rule...

These interactions point at a sorry situation: irrespective of political views, Tamil diaspora youth harbour a strong affection towards Sri Lanka. The extent of misinformation, misunderstanding, misjudgements, lack of knowledge in Sri Lankan history and critical thinking are phenomenal. Making them see things in a different light, re-read history, understand the perceptions of 'the other', are all extremely difficult tasks, which in many cases, are very likely to end up in total failure. Yet, it is clearer than ever that something has to be done. Someone has to take the initiative to 'engage' the young Tamil diaspora in the post-conflict socioeconomic and cultural life of Sri Lanka – i.e. the 'real' Sri Lanka, not the tear-drop *terre natale* of their imaginaire.

It is indeed high time that the government of Sri Lanka and its diplomatic apparatus elaborated a sincere, inclusive, far-sighted and long-term plan to engage constructively with Tamil diaspora youth. Virtually all of them are proud inheritors of a culture that prioritises education and hard work. Irrespective of the country they live in, the passport they travel with and the language they are most comfortable with, getting to know them, one instantly notices that familiar energy, that zest for hard work and the deeply-felt need to gain good results – not strange to those familiar with Sri Lanka's Tamil community and its colossal contributions to the island in every field. They love Sri Lanka, and political views put aside, their affection to the island is an extremely sincere one – way more sincere than the patriotism of many a Sri Lankan politico. As they enter the job market as qualified and well-trained professionals (many of them with skills that could tremendously serve Sri Lanka's post-conflict economic revival), a concrete strategy of luring their support and attracting them to post-war Sri Lanka would strongly benefit the economic, social and cultural development

and transformation of our land. It is vital to amalgamate such a strategy with timely reforms of Sri Lankan citizenship, which needs to encompass a broader scope of eligibility; similar to the concept of Irish citizenship (anyone with immediate Irish ancestry, through at least one of his/her parents/grandparents, is eligible for Irish citizenship. Given the size of the Sri Lankan diaspora and the speed at which it is expanding, and pondering on Ireland's history of immigration and our own, methinks a more inclusive citizenship policy will serve us best in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (in an insightful article published in his blog, Mr Indi Samarajeewa has recently voiced the need for citizenship law reform in a relatively similar vein). Right from the First Citizen and diplomats to Citizens home and abroad, Sri Lankans should never forget the salient reality that despite passports, languages and political views, Tamil diaspora youth are all sons and daughters of our land. Acknowledging so, helping them discover, live, enjoy and love the 'real' Sri Lanka will be among the greatest achievements the Head of State and the diplomatic machinery could achieve in post-war Sri Lanka.

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