

Sri Lanka: Nationalist mobilisations – first as tragedy, then as farce

Friday 14 October 2016, by [KADIRGAMAR Ahilan](#) (Date first published: 7 October 2016).

The Eluga Tamil rally on September 24 in Jaffna was nothing but the continuation of efforts to keep reactionary Tamil nationalism mobilised after the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. The forces that organised this protest have been active with the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF), the Tamil Civil Society Forum (TCSF) and more recently the Tamil People's Council (TPC). Their chauvinist Tamil nationalist rhetoric attempts to capture the political mainstream in Jaffna and carve out a space within the Tamil political sphere dominated by the TNA.

Contents

- [Tamil grievances and national](#)
- [Social base](#)
- [Reactionary mobilisations](#)
- [Confusion and allies](#)
- [National debate and dialogue](#)

The polarising politics centred on the projection of victimhood and the call for international intervention is not new, the genocide resolution by the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) last year was one such instance. However, the Eluga Tamil protest requires careful analysis as it has not only kindled ethno-nationalist emotions, but also put people on the streets without any realistic political path ahead.

The Eluga Tamil rally has also caused much confusion in the South. Is the protest an effort to address the genuine grievances of the Tamil people? Is this a decisive blow to the TNA and a serious challenge to the TNA's approach of engaging Colombo over the last two years? Are these signs of a resurgence of Tamil militancy? The answer to all three questions is in the negative; due to the reactionary character of the rally's engagement, the narrow political base of the mobilisation and the post-war debilitation of the Tamil community.

However, the Eluga Tamil protest is a worrying development in the downward trend of Tamil politics; characteristically, it seeks to co-opt genuine people's grievances into reactionary Tamil nationalist ends. It reflects the lack of self-criticism needed to address the tragedy that has engulfed the Tamil community. Though I argue that the Eluga Tamil protests, much like Rajapaksa's Pada Yathra, is a farce, it is a wake-up call to the country; chauvinist politics on both sides of the divide are again trying to reclaim the political mainstream.

Tamil grievances and national processes

There are indeed political grievances that are at the centre of Tamil politics; there is the unresolved national question predating the war, concerns linked to the devastation of the war and the

continuing deprivation of rights and economic dispossession post-war.

An important political challenge is national recognition of the immense suffering of the people who went through the war and how their lives continue to be marred by the failures of the state. This is a political challenge and no amount of transitional justice consultations and experts can bring about such recognition; it requires nothing less than a national debate and dialogue.

The main political grievance facing the Tamils and other minorities since independence is the majoritarian centralised state that is undemocratic.

Indeed, a non-unitary structure of the state which not only devolves power to the provinces, but also further down to the communities is crucial. Such a constitution is also necessary to make sure the bureaucracy and judiciary do not work with a centralised unitary mind-set; restricting state structures from usurping people's local decision making powers is critical to address regional problems and aspirations.

However, the Tamil nationalists' demand for devolution and power-sharing does not take the related process of democratisation seriously. In other words, they do not address the process by which much needed devolution and power sharing would empower all those who are marginalised by class, caste, gender and region within the Tamil community; rather it is for them a tussle for power between the Tamil elite and the Sinhala elite.

Take land for example. Some of it has been taken over by the military and of course, should be released immediately, but there are also a large number of landless people within the Tamil community who also need to be resettled. In the Jaffna District, about ten percent of the population are landless and do not even qualify for the post-war housing grants. But rarely have Tamil nationalists considered the plight of the landless. For a mobilisation like Eluga Thamil, this is not grievance enough, for it does not directly involve the state and by implication the Sinhala community. Furthermore, the resettlement of the Muslims evicted by the LTTE is never a concern for them.

The issues of disappearances and political prisoners related to the war and its aftermath remain crucial. Here, the lack of political will on the part of the government to urgently address the release of the remaining detainees is unacceptable. However, rarely do Tamil nationalists attempt to understand and find the common ground with the plight and legacy of those families dealing with disappearances or political prisoners after the JVP insurrections, for instance. The Tamil nationalist campaign on disappearances is focused on delegitimising the state, but remains indifferent to how the families of the disappeared or, for that matter, the released prisoners might find ways to address their continuing social and economic deprivation that the post-war years have only aggravated.

The demand for demilitarisation is similarly of paramount importance. Indeed, why is it that seven years after the war and almost two years after regime change, there isn't a serious debate about demilitarisation in the country? While militarisation affects the North disproportionately including with pernicious surveillance and intimidation in post-war years, the issue is in reality about the entire country. The size of the military has to be reduced through a process by which the young men and women in the military are given alternatives for education and employment. The role of the military in national life should diminish and the security preoccupation of an earlier war-time polity has to change. Not only should the Prevention of Terrorism Act be repealed, the Terrorism Investigation Department should be dismantled and the criminal justice system as whole which deteriorated with the war, should be reformed. These are part of a national initiative towards demilitarisation that is not limited to the North and East.

The Tamil community was devastated by both the security forces and the LTTE. In the post-war context, the concerns of the oppressed castes, of those Up-country Tamils who were displaced to the Vanni, and of women solely carrying the burden of families, lie with both the state and their local communities. However, the Tamil nationalists reduce these to the grievances of “Tamil victims” against a “Sinhala state”.

That the state can dispossess large sections of the Sinhala community is also not a consideration for the Tamil nationalists, who see their struggle as one taken up solely by themselves. Indeed, for the Tamil nationalists, ethnicity is the marker of victimhood, and deliverance is associated with the international community.

The Eluga Thamil protest and its demands claiming to articulate Tamil grievances were grounded in reactionary assertions about the Tamil homeland, nation and sovereignty, in this it is not very different from its political twin, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The TPC flyer in Tamil that was widely circulated before the protest was couched in anti-Sinhala and anti-Buddhist rhetoric; it amplified the fears about Buddha statues and Sinhala colonisation as well as the need for an international investigation for war crimes in bold print and only in small print did it address issues such as land and political prisoners. While the Eluga Thamil declaration claims to address the government and the international actors, the demagoguery against the military and the obtuse rhetoric of Sinhala Buddhist “settler colonialism”, is no different from the extreme rhetoric of actors such as Bodu BalaSena.

Social base

Much of the confusion about the Eluga Thamil protest is due to the lack of understanding of the social base of the TPC.

The narrow social base committed to the politics of the TNPF, TCSF and TPC are largely from Jaffna’s urban professional class. It consists of sections of lawyers, doctors, Christian clergy, university lecturers and journalists. These classes are economically stable with regular incomes and not subject to the precarious life and economic travails facing the rest of the war-torn society; particularly in rural Jaffna and the districts in the Vanni and the East. Their class background and relationship to the Tamil Diaspora means they form that section of the population that continues to receive remittances and have one foot in the Diaspora with their children considering migration. Therefore, they have the luxury of a wager with extreme and unrealistic Tamil nationalist goals over rebuilding social institutions necessary to sustain local social life and a meaningful path towards a political solution.

Their rhetoric is amplified in the Tamil media and through nationalist Diaspora forums, thus creating the illusion of representing a broad Tamil constituency. In reality, they are tapping into the conservative, right wing ideological constructs of Tamil society and linking it to their Tamil nationalist politics. In this, they are not very different from the TNA as a whole; they play on the fears about the Sinhala and Muslim population constructed as the “oppressive other”, they have no critique about the “cultural deterioration” discourse which attempts to control Tamil women and they continue to refuse to even discuss caste oppression within Tamil society.

Such right wing discourses do have a hearing among sections of the Tamil community, and it is the support of such conservative sections of society including youth lacking a progressive alternative that gave the protest some breadth. Indeed, the Eluga Tamil mobilisation is not different from the TNA mobilisations during election times, they all try to tap into such conservative trends in Tamil society.

These discourses are kept fertile by the insular and reactionary Tamil media. While the rift between the TNA leadership and the TPC meant the popular Uthayan newspaper avoided supporting the Eluga Tamil rally, the Valampuri newspaper with its Hindu nationalist backing for Chief Minister Wigneswaran worked overtime to promote the rally.

Meanwhile, one should not overestimate the strength of forces behind the Eluga Tamil rally, their limited constituency and electoral relevance are evident from the August 2015 parliamentary elections, where despite Wigneswaran throwing his weight behind them, the TNPF could not even win one seat and were soundly defeated.

It is the losers in that election who along with other opportunistic actors that are now trying to create a political platform for themselves by projecting Wigneswaran and his office. Significant here is also the failure of the NPC led by Wigneswaran; the NPC has failed to even activate its administration through the statutes- something well within its powers -is yet to provide a clear vision for the economic development of the North regardless of its powers and continues to even block other initiatives towards regional development. The defeat in Parliamentary elections and the failure to deliver through the NPC have led them to project their political image.

This is no different from how former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the remnants of his regime resorted to the Pada Yathra, as they increasingly felt politically marginalised after successive election defeats. The political images that Rajapaksa and Wigneswaran - and those who attempt to promote them - are not only dependent on illustrating their capacity to mobilise people on to the streets but also projecting the image that they are the true saviours of their ethnic communities, through the vilification of the Tamil and Sinhala communities respectively.

Reactionary mobilisations

The Eluga Tamil rally is a shift in that, from reactionary statements and resolutions and polarising election rhetoric in recent years, they have now brought people on to the streets. Such a move is worrying because the fallout of such emotive mobilisations cannot even be directed by the very actors who initiate them. A recent case in point is the rape and murder of schoolgirl Vidya Sivaloganathan last year. While protests erupted all over Jaffna, it culminated in the call for the death penalty for the accused and stoning of the court house demanding mob justice. The politics of that protest, rather than encouraged deeper reflection on women's oppression within Tamil society only resulted in a macho Tamil discourse of saving Tamil women.

Historically, the Federal Party and the TULF took a polarising path in the 1960s and 1970s culminating in the Vaddukottai resolution for a separate state. And they paid for it with the elimination of their own leadership, including the assassinations of TULF leader Amirthalingam and a whole range of their prominent and second rung leaders by the very LTTE, which in its early stages was encouraged through such narrow nationalist mobilisations. Such nationalist politics and eventually the LTTE's suicidal politics have been devastating for the Tamil community. Given the tremendous suffering with the war and the loss of an entire generation, actors within the Tamil community will not be able to initiate another insurrection. However, polarisation and social anarchy are options for reactionary forces that have no qualms about watching Tamil society suffer in order for their own opportunistic politics and to keep the separatist logic alive.

In places like Mullaitivu, there was little interest in the Eluga Tamil rally. There the everyday issues facing farmers, fisher folk and the landless preoccupy them even as they yearn for both solutions to their everyday concerns as well as a political solution. Many in Mullaitivu say if the Jaffna politicians come to meet them, they would "hammer them with slippers" for not addressing our concerns, but at

election we will vote for the “house” the symbol of the Federal party.

In Districts like the Killinochi and Mannar, farmers and fisherfolk having given up on the Tamil nationalist politicians seek to engage the Central government directly on issue of land alienation, access to coastal areas for fishing and the banning of illegal fishing practices. These war-torn people are far from the “victims” who are waiting either to be saved by the Tamil nationalists or the international community. They are demonstrating enormous resilience and resolve every day of their lives. At one level, they have no faith in the TNA and the NPC. Yet given the unresolved national question they are likely to vote for the TNA at election time. These contradictions are reflections of the vacuum in Tamil politics.

Fourteen years ago during the ceasefire period, the LTTE organised the Pongu Tamil mobilisations under the cover of doing “political work”, but in reality, they made local actors complicit in their separatist politics and prepared them for war. The LTTE’s Pongu Tamil mobilisations glorified their ability to make war, and it continued on as a massive social mobilisation towards what the LTTE called the “final war”. The Eluga Tamil protest drew on the memory of its Pongu Tamil predecessor, but in contrast to the LTTE’s militarised Tamil politics, it is projecting victimhood and a false of hope international intervention. With the LTTE and Pongu Tamil, the people had little choice; almost all social institutions and even schoolchildren were herded to these protests backed by the power of the gun. The Eluga Tamil protest neither has the same hold on the people nor does it find any support from the international actors, who are all busy cosyng upto Colombo for their own interests.

The political moves of the LTTE during the ceasefire period eventually ended in the tragedy of Mullivaikal with thousands of youth forcefully recruited and sacrificed by the LTTE and the people mowed down by the tremendous fire power of the Security Forces. That tragedy is now followed by the farce of Eluga Tamil.

Confusion and allies

Yet this farce of a mobilisation has not only created confusion among the youth in Jaffna about the way forward, it also seems to have confused some “progressives” in Colombo.

The sections of the liberals and progressive leftists in Colombo who generously recognise the demands of Eluga Tamil are as flawed as those in the Sinhala community who earlier felt the urge to accept and support the LTTE. It is not just patronising, but also dangerous, for the rhetoric they are endorsing actively seeks to polarise the country. It was the height of irresponsibility by those Sinhala liberals who were gleeful about the ascendancy of the LTTE; they neither took a position when the Tamils, including dissidents were being targeted as “traitors” by the LTTE nor did they have to face the consequences of the tragedy that engulfed the Tamil community.

While some from Colombo’s NGO and human rights circuits aligned themselves with forums such as the TCSF during the post-war years under the Rajapaksa regime, they have for the most part distanced themselves after regime change, reflecting the tenuous instrumentality of such alliances.

In the current context, if Sinhala progressives deem it necessary to align with reactionary Tamil nationalism, in order to oppose Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism, it is nothing but a sad reflection of their political inaptitude and folly. Instead, if they align with forces within all communities that stand for coexistence, they would be working towards a movement for social justice and a credible political solution. What is needed is principled solidarity, not this sort of misplaced sympathy emanating from liberal ethnic guilt.

Protests are elements of radical democracy, but the politics of such protests should be a central concern. With the opening of space after January 2015, there have been a number of large protests in the North. The residents of Vadamaratchy East, along the eastern coast of Jaffna peninsula, protested against an Asian Development Bank's desalination project in February this year; they have consistently felt marginalised by the Jaffna elite and their protest was about the dangers of undermining their fishing livelihoods toward the water needs of Jaffna town. In July this year, there was a major protest outside the NPC by the fisher folk from the all parts of the Northern Province; they were challenging the NPC to take a stand on poaching Indian trawlers and bottom trawling more generally, which undermine their livelihoods. It is such protests that require progressive solidarity, but often go unnoticed.

In this context, those who stand to gain from the Eluga Tamil protest are its true friends, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists. The extreme nationalists on both sides of the divide are not only allies in keeping their polarising rhetoric alive, but also for their common goal of disrupting any process towards a political solution; one to keep its separatist logic going and the other to maintain Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian hegemony.

National debate and dialogue

For this state of affairs, the TNA leadership and the government are not without blame. To start with, if the political mainstream was occupied by debates about the political solution, it would not have provided as much space to the nationalists in the north and south. Instead, both the TNA leadership and the government have attempted to confine discussions on the political solution to a small core in Colombo, even as the public remains in the dark. Furthermore, while the TNA has done little to address the Tamil community both about the social and political contradictions within the community and the way forward in national politics, the government has done little to get the South to recognise the gravity of the national question that has stifled the country for decades.

In the South, the progressives have the challenge of both initiating a debate on demilitarisation and self-critical reflection on the legacy of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony.

The military and Buddhism's privileged relationship to the state cannot be kept out of the bounds of debate. If the government and the political elite are failing at this national task given their narrow agendas, it should be the priority and untiring task of progressives and the radical left to initiate such national debates critical for addressing the national question.

The Tamil political sphere is equally in need of deeper debates to find its progressive political bearings. That involves the need for struggles around Tamil working class concerns, anti-caste mobilisations and the strengthening of women's movements as well as discussions on the Tamil community's relationship with other communities, the regional and rural inequalities within the North and East, and broader concerns about political power including devolved power. A critique of Tamil nationalism and what the fascist political culture of the LTTE did to the Tamil community should be at the heart of such reflection.

While the national challenge in January 2015 was about defeating authoritarianism, the current challenge is one about co-existence and a political solution. The Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese who desire co-existence have to rise up to the challenge to defeat the forces of polarisation and chauvinism.

The solutions for the country, whether it be demilitarisation, a political solution or economic justice, will require the joint struggles of those who share a plural vision for Sri Lanka. Not the polarising

politics and farcical mobilisations such as Pada Yathra and ElugaThamil.

Ahilan Kadirgamar

P.S.

*<http://www.dailynews.lk/2016/10/07/features/95217>