

Canada's Tamils still have a role to play

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After more than 30 years of sustained open violence, six failed peace accords, numerous but ultimately unsuccessful mediation efforts, more than 70,000 dead, persistent political assassinations including the deaths of India's prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka's Sinhalese president Ranasinghe Premadasa, the people of Sri Lanka are undoubtedly too exhausted to contemplate the possibility that even more violence is on the horizon. But that is a grim reality that must be contemplated.

The next few months will be decisive in determining if the future of Sri Lanka will be one of negotiations, political stability and economic growth or continued but sporadic violence in which neither side is able or willing to abide by the terms of a settlement process. On the whole, there are sound reasons for both optimism and pessimism.

On the one hand, without pressure for moderation, Sri Lanka's political leaders have little incentive to turn the country back to status quo ante bellum. The future could easily be a government intent on completely crushing the minority and going back to solutions involving the manipulation of ethnic identity and democracy to serve the interests of the dominant Sinhalese.

The last eight years of discussion between Sinhalese and Tamils have demonstrated various key problems in this regard. Despite the apparent defeat of the Tigers, both groups remain heavily influenced by extremist elements within their ranks, preventing them from compromising and forcing them to adopt a rigid stance. The Tamil Tigers were well known for their viciousness toward moderate Tamils. It remains to be seen if a generation of brutalized Tamils are willing or even capable of participating in a peace process.

By the same token, Tamil claims that include power sharing and autonomy in the Northern and Eastern provinces, now seem modest in comparison to the out-right secessionist demands of the Tigers. Achieving autonomy requires constant pressure on the government of Sri Lanka to negotiate in good faith. This includes opening itself to international scrutiny regarding claims of recurrent human rights violations. More immediate concerns revolve around the ability of Sri Lanka's government to effectively manage the emerging humanitarian crisis in the North, to accept aid conditional on the effective management of the political situation, and to quell extremist dissenters.

On the other hand, there is some room for optimism. Despite repeated efforts by Tamils in Canada and elsewhere to pressure foreign governments to intervene in the last stages of the conflict, the leaders of these countries understood, correctly, that to do so would not only delegitimize our own democratic processes, it would be counterproductive. Over the last 20 years, numerous attempts by third parties, including Canada, have been made to bring peace to the island. All failed because neither party to the conflict was sincere in their commitments to peace.

Yes, it is true that Canada has a very large stake in this conflict. Until recently, Sri Lanka was a long-time recipient of Canadian bilateral development assistance. More significantly, Canada is home to one of the largest Tamil diaspora populations in the world, as was made clear with enormous recent demonstrations in Ottawa and Toronto. Canada is a demographically diverse nation with diasporas that are connected instantaneously, constantly, and confidentially making it particularly susceptible to diaspora linkages, including unmonitored financial flows.

For that reason, the preeminent outcome from a Canadian perspective is that we are now beginning to really understand the significance of being a demographically diverse, immigrant driven country. Diasporas have had and will continue to have an immense impact on our foreign, security and development policies and priorities.

Canada's Tamil diaspora has played a major role in shaping and influencing Sri Lanka's conflict by financing the fighting and reinforcing cultural identity, pushing both sides to adopt more rigid positions. Stopping the violence from recurring and moving the country toward a lasting settlement will depend on their willingness to support calls for moderation, economic growth and stability in the country they once called home.

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