

The war's over, but the troubles remain: Psychological constraints on reconciliation in a  
post-LTTE Sri Lanka

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#### Abstract

There are good reasons to celebrate the Sri Lankan government's recent victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, the Tamil population's distrust of the government will not change easily. The Tamil diaspora located in Europe, Australia and Canada saw the LTTE as the only force that could protect the Tamil people from complete annihilation, and the war's end has left them humiliated and confused. Significant psychological hurdles, particularly collective narcissism and core beliefs on the part of the Sinhalese, and a sense of humiliation on the part of the Tamil diaspora, need to be overcome.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, civil war, humiliation, collective narcissism, core beliefs

There are good reasons to celebrate the Sri Lankan government's final victory over the Tamil Tiger rebels in May 2009. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were arguably one of the most effective, brutal and repressive terrorist organizations in the world, with a crypto-fascist ideology focused on the personality cult of their now-slain leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran (Narayan Swamy, 1994; 2003). The LTTE pioneered the use of the suicide bomber, pressed child soldiers into their ranks, and killed two heads of state and tens of thousands of civilians. During the final days of the Sri Lankan Army's assault in early 2009, the Tigers shot Tamil civilians trapped as human shields if they attempted to flee (International Crisis Group, 2009). Their demise has given Sri Lanka its best chance of ending a long-standing ethnic conflict that has troubled the island nation for more than 25 years.

However, the Sri Lankan government's triumphant celebrations and promises of a peaceful future mask deep differences about the consequences of the war's end for the different communities affected by and invested in the civil war. In this paper, we highlight the perspectives of three distinct communities whose needs and demands must be adequately satisfied for long-term reconciliation; the Sinhalese majority, the Tamil minority, and the Tamil diaspora in the West and Australia. Many Sinhalese exhibit the false polarization bias (Ross, 2000) by seeing the war as simply a terrorist problem that threatened their homeland, a view possibly accentuated by collective narcissism, a form of unstable group-based self-esteem, as will be discussed later. However, Tamils have been victims of systematic discrimination by successive post-independence Sinhalese-dominated governments. Tamil nationalism began as a peaceful movement for minority

rights, but a failure to achieve a political settlement eventually led to armed militant movements fighting for a separate Tamil state (International Crisis Group, 2007). More recently, Tamils in the Sinhala-majority south of the country have been subjected to constant surveillance, and suspected LTTE sympathizers have been “disappeared” by counterinsurgency forces (Keenan, 2007). The Tamil diaspora represents a third, more radicalized perspective that has for the most part sided strongly with the LTTE. They saw the LTTE as the only force that could protect the Tamil people from complete annihilation, and the war’s end has left them humiliated and confused. Finding common ground that unites these Sinhalese and Tamil narratives is vital for a sustainable peace, but significant psychological hurdles must first be overcome. This paper discusses a number of these hurdles.

### **Grievances of the Tamils**

The civil war in Sri Lanka was in part the result of a long-standing history of tensions between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil population. Following independence from Britain in 1948, there was a perceived sense that the Tamils had too much power due to the privileged position that the British assigned them in their administration (Bandarage, 2008). While the concerns of ethnic Tamils increased in the years following independence, a Sinhalese Buddhist revival gained momentum, culminating in the 1956 election of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike as prime minister on a “Sinhala-First” platform. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which made Sinhala the sole official language of the country until 1987, led to the ethnic riots targeting the Tamils in 1958. As a result, interest in greater autonomy and independence increased among the Tamil community during the 1950s and 1960s. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) was established in 1976 with the goal of achieving self-determination for the

Tamil people, and unsuccessfully tried to achieve Tamil independence through democratic means (Fair, 2005).

From the late 1970's a number of Tamil insurgency groups formed, as it became increasingly clear that parties in the parliamentary sphere were unsuccessful in forwarding the concerns of the Tamil people. Early groups included the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), the People's Liberation Organization for Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Eelam Peoples' Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), and the Tamil New Tigers, later known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE secured dominance among these groups through a program of elimination and assassination. By the mid-1980s, the LTTE was the single dominant voice of militant Tamil aspirations. In 1983, riots targeting the Tamil community, which were in response to the killing of 13 army personnel by the LTTE and implicitly supported by the government, led to the deaths of thousands of Tamils, the emigration of thousands more, and the escalation of the war with the LTTE. More recently, as part of the war against the Tigers, Tamils in the south of the country were subjected to constant surveillance and searches, and more controversially, suspected LTTE sympathizers have been picked up in unmarked vehicles by counterinsurgency forces and "disappeared." While most urban Tamils in Sri Lanka are not unhappy to see the end of the LTTE, and hope that their harassment by security forces will ease as a result, their sense that they remain second-class citizens will not change without a serious effort at national reconciliation. The Sri Lankan government has thus far not initiated any significant political reforms to address Tamil concerns. With the conclusion of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC), a government-sponsored body that failed to craft any constitutional reforms, there is currently no sign of an alternative process. Tamil parties remain weak and divided, in

part because of the LTTE monopoly over Tamil political voices in the past (International Crisis Group, 2010).

Furthermore, in violation of local and international humanitarian law, more than 280,000 civilians who had survived the final months of fighting between the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE were detained from May to December, 2009. The camps were closed to independent inspection. Tamils civilians could not leave the camps, and were provided with insufficient nutrition, medical supplies and sanitation facilities (Amnesty International, 2009). In the five months following the end of the war, only 20,000 were allowed to return home, although the sudden importance of the Tamil vote in the 2010 presidential election between Mahinda Rajapakse and Sarath Fonseka led to the relocation of a further 147,000 people out of the camps into transit centers, a process that has not been without problems (International Crisis Group, 2010). As of January 2010, government security forces tightly control the movement of civilians in the north of the country, and no international non-governmental organizations are allowed the visit areas where civilians have been resettled (except for Jaffna in the north). Many of the homes of those who have been displaced have been looted and destroyed.

### **Collective Narcissism and the Sinhalese Majority**

Sri Lanka's president, Mahinda Rajapakse, was elected with broad support from the majority Sinhalese in November of 2005 with a promise to end the war with the LTTE. This was achieved with high casualties sustained by an army made up mostly of Sinhalese youth, with at least 6200 dead and wounded in the final three years of the war ("Last phase of Sri Lanka war killed 6,200 troops: government", 2009), and similarly high casualties suffered by the LTTE and by Tamil civilians caught in the crossfire. Many Sinhalese saw the war as largely a terrorist problem that threatened their homeland.

Similarly, the Sri Lankan government has consistently presented the war in the north and east of the country as one of underdevelopment, while denying the political and ethnic nature of the conflict (International Crisis Group, 2010). The victory speech of Mahinda Rajapakse following the conclusion of hostilities in May 2009 succinctly captures the perspective of many Sinhalese people towards the conflict:

We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary three years ago. No longer are the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities. There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth.

Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group. (Government of Sri Lanka, 2010)

As the leader of a party representing the interests of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka noted, if the president had wanted to reassure the minorities in the country, it would have been better to say there was no longer any majority community in Sri Lanka (International Crisis Group, 2010)

The concept of collective narcissism may be important in explaining the Sinhala majority's attitude toward the war's end. Collective narcissism is defined as an emotional investment in unrealistic beliefs about the in-group's greatness (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson & Jayawickreme, 2009). It can be seen as an extension of individual narcissism to the social aspects of self, since a positive relationship between individual and collective narcissism may exist since the self-concept consists of personal self and social identities based on the groups to which people belong (Hornsey, 2003). However, narcissistic idealization of a group may also be a strategy to protect a weak and threatened ego. Narcissistic identification with an in-group is likely to emerge in social

and cultural contexts that diminish the ego and socialize individuals to put their group in the center of their lives, attention, emotions, and actions (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). Thus, the development of narcissistic group identification can be fostered by certain social contexts independent of individual-level narcissism.

The double-minority nature of the Sri Lankan conflict is one important factor that may feed collective narcissism. While the Tamils of Sri Lanka are a minority within the island, the Sinhalese feel that they are a minority compared to the large Tamil population in southern India. McCauley claims that such double-minority conflicts have a special intensity since both groups feel that their groups, culture and way of life are under threat as a result of the war (2001). Schaller and Abeyasinghe demonstrated the repercussions of minority awareness among Sinhalese participants (2006). They made one of two geographical regions more salient: either Sri Lanka alone or a broader region of south Asia. When Sinhalese participants were inclined to think of their group as the outnumbered minority, stereotypical perceptions of Tamils were more demonizing (i.e., depicting Tamils as more malevolent and also more competent), and their conflict-relevant attitudes were less conciliatory. Terror management theory provides another explanation for the insecurity that results from double-minority status (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997); given that people's ability to deal successfully with existential fears about their mortality are tied up with their membership of enduring and valued groups, reminders about the threat that the "majority" poses to the group increases anger towards the outgroup (McCauley, 2001) and could motivate an increase in collective narcissism.

On the part of the Sinhalese, many feel that the Tamils made unfair demands on the Sinhalese polity in the past—such as the demand for "50/50" power sharing

immediately over federalism following independence in 1948 (Singer, 1996)— and are unrealistic in their current demands, as seen by the former Sri Lankan Army chief and 2010 presidential election candidate Sarath Fonseka:

I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities and we treat them like our people. We being the majority of the country, 75 per cent, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country.... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things.

(Bell, 2009)

In addition to Fonseka's belief that the Tamils should not make "unreasonable demands" (The Economist, 2010), recent opinion articles by pro-government commentators have castigated Tamil leaders for their post-LTTE ambition (e.g. Jayathilake, 2009).

### **Cognitive Biases**

This collective narcissism that many Sinhalese arguably express may predispose them to engage in "dangerous thinking" that may in the long run lead to an escalation of conflict (Schaller & Abeyasinghe, 2006). Such thoughts involve five core concerns that can heighten inter-group animosity and impose barriers on reconciliation (Eidelson & Eidelson, 2002). These concerns revolve around issues of vulnerability, injustice, distrust, superiority, and helplessness. With regards to group-level beliefs about superiority, glorifying myths that claim entitlement to land and power through a selective recounting of a group's history have been widespread in the south of the country following the end of the war. For example, in the months following the end of the civil war, posters and pandols comparing Rajapakse favorably with Dutugemunu, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C Sinhalese

king who defeated and killed the Tamil king Elara to regain the Rajarata kingdom in north-central Sri Lanka. This juxtaposition is a good example of what Volkan (1999) called a *chosen glory* that constitutes a “ritualistic recollection of events and heroes whose mental representations include a shared feeling of success and triumph among group members” (quoted in Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003, p. 185).

With regard to group-level distrust, the in-group bias can exacerbate levels of mistrust between groups (Tajfel, 1982). The positive attributes of group identification -- a sense of belonging, a guard against negative stimuli, a sense of support -- particularly in Sri Lanka’s history post-colonization, has assisted in creating strong outgroup/outgroup distinctions across relatively weak social and ethnic differences (see Sen, 2006, for an extended discussion of this effect). As Chirot and McCauley further explain of how such associations can perpetuate militancy and violence: “whatever its origin, group conflict does not produce violence without a consensus among the in-group, or at least its leaders, that another group has done something both wrong and harmful, something dangerous to the in-group” (2006, p. 71). One manifestation of this polarization is the lack of an inclusive sense of Sri Lankan nationalism. While nationalism can in some cases overcome internal differences (Chirot, 2001), notions of nationalism in Sri Lanka have always been tied up with notions of ethnicity, and political discourse has been dominated by ethnic considerations.

Similar to the in-group bias, the outgroup homogeneity bias reflects the tendency for one to perceive differences within the in-group, but see the out-group as homogenous and proponents of a singular view (Quattrone, 1986). The Sri Lankan conflict is complicated by the many different groups involved: Rajapakse’s United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government; the opposition free-market oriented United

National Party (UNP); the LTTE; the Naxalite People's Liberation Front (JVP); as well as Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim<sup>1</sup> civilians, who comprise the majority of Sri Lankan residents. Yet despite these sub-groups, the presence of an outgroup homogeneity bias has focused attention solely on ethnicity; for example, many Tamils fear that the government simplistically associates Tamil civilians with the LTTE (Keenan, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2007). These biases were in part perpetuated by the terrorist attacks that the LTTE perpetrated in the south of the country during the civil war. The LTTE provoked fear among the Sinhalese through a series of bombings and killings, particularly in the months following the government's withdrawal from a ceasefire negotiated in 2006 (International Crisis Group, 2008). Explaining the conflict as simply an evenhanded dispute between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE is thus mistaken, as many more parties were involved (Keenan, 2007).

Such biases have driven the heavy-handed way in which the Sri Lankan government has controlled the narrative of the conflict. Similar to the LTTE's effective ban on dissent, the costs of the fighting in the north to the civilian population have been hidden for the most part from the general public (International Crisis Group, 2008). The lack of transparency in the state-controlled media during the final months of the conflict allowed extremist positions to flourish among the Sinhalese, and have contributed to maintaining a continual sense of threat (Coll, 2009). Suppressing coverage of the atrocities of the final months of the war has ensured continued support for and political trust in the government. Hiding the high costs of the conflict averts public dissent, but could also foster polarization between the two communities uncertain of the facts on the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> The Muslim community in Sri Lanka is recognized as both an ethnic and religious group.

Moreover, the government's decision to limit press coverage of the final days of the war has controlled how the conclusion of the conflict was viewed worldwide. Independent journalists were not given access to the conflict zone, and several foreign correspondents who cover the region have been placed on a no-entry list (Sengupta, 2009). The Sri Lankan government continues to manipulate information about the situation in the north and east. (International Crisis Group, 2010).

### **Humiliation and the Tamils**

Allegedly motivated by ethnic profiling, a large number of Tamil civilians were incarcerated following the end of the war without regard to international opinion (Amnesty International, 2009). These arrests may have caused significant humiliation for the Tamil community, in part because of the seemingly strong asymmetry of power on display: “[T]he message being sent to Tamils in Sri Lanka and in the million-strong diaspora was a humiliating one which has undermined the chances for political reconciliation” (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 2). Humiliation is a potentially powerful individual- and group-level emotion that has received little empirical attention. McCauley (2006) has defined humiliation as the emotional response to demeaning treatment by an individual or a group too powerful to counter. Such a response may constitute suppressed anger and shame at the inability to retaliate. Lindner (2006) has argued that humiliation is likely associated with more extreme retaliatory acts. However, Ginges and Atran (2008) found that Palestinians who felt humiliated by the presence of Israeli checkpoints were both less likely to show support for a peace deal *and* for political violence. Thus, inertia may be the most expected response to humiliation. It should be noted, however, that distinguishing humiliation from other self-conscious emotions such as shame and guilt is difficult and remains an area for future research.

It is quite likely that many Tamils in Sri Lanka feel significant humiliation as a group in light of the LTTE's defeat, despite their lukewarm support for many of their activities. While both Rajapakse and Fonseka courted the Tamil vote in the 2010 presidential election, many Tamils would see little choice between the two men:

Now, put yourself in a Tamil's shoes, and decide whom to vote for in the presidential election: Choose either the head of the government that ordered the attacks against you and your family, or the head of the army that carried it all out. Tamil humiliation and frustration could well lead to militancy again<sup>2</sup>.

(Patten, 2010)

The Tamil diaspora, who were more stringent supports of the LTTE, are more likely than the Tamils in Sri Lanka to feel an even stronger sense of humiliation. In this context, the Tamil diaspora represents a third, more radicalized group that has supported and sided strongly with the LTTE. Given their identification with the LTTE, the sense of humiliation that they felt as a result would be considerably more intense. As many as 25% of the Sri Lankan Tamil population live in diaspora (Adamaly, Cuter, & Veketeswar, 2002). During the civil war, many in the diaspora were able to generate substantial sympathy and support for the LTTE, and coordinated these efforts through a number of umbrella organizations, including the Illankai Tamil Sangam in the USA and the International Federation of Tamils in the UK (Fair, 2005). From the early 1980s, the LTTE established offices spanning at least 40 countries (Gunaratna, 1998). Its global infrastructure was largely based on its diaspora, and provided valuable funding for its terrorist activities; around 80 percent of the LTTE's \$82 million annual income came

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<sup>2</sup> Fonseka ended up winning a substantial majority in the Tamil-majority areas of the country, although Rajapakse won massive majorities in the rest of the country, and the election as a whole by 1.7 million votes.

from such fundraising (Fair, 2005). The LTTE covertly operated under names such as the United Tamil Organization, the World Tamil Movement, and the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization in countries where the movement was banned, and also exploited non-profit organizations by redirecting funds intended for social, medical and rehabilitation assistance in Sri Lanka. Such organizations systematically promoted a propaganda narrative of the Tamils as innocent victims of military repression by Sri Lanka's security forces and of Sinhalese anti-Tamil discrimination; the LTTE as the only legitimate voice of the Tamils and the only vehicle capable of defending and promoting Tamil interests in Sri Lanka; and the impossibility of peace until Tamils achieve their own independent state under the LTTE's leadership (Byman et al., 2001, quoted in Fair, 2005).

The worldview of Sri Lankan-British musician M.I.A.'s characterization of the conflict as "genocide" on Tavis Smiley's PBS show in January 2009 captures this extremist sentiment of large Tamil communities in cities such as London and Toronto, who saw the LTTE as the only force that could protect the Tamil people from complete annihilation (McCauley, 2001). As a result of the LTTE's capitulation, the war's end has left the Tamil diaspora humiliated and confused about the future of a struggle that they were both emotionally and financially invested in, as evidenced by their initial reluctance to accept the reality of Prabhakaran's death.

For the most part, the Tamil diaspora has continued its call for a separate Tamil state, in part through the founding of organizations such as the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) and the Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, which claim to promote this goal through non-violent means. Such calls from the Tamil diaspora add to the political challenges faced by Tamil-speaking parties in the post-war political climate. As a Western diplomat told International Crisis Group:

The fact that the TNA and the SLMC<sup>3</sup> and others can talk now is a sign of improvement and an effect of the LTTE's absence. It gives the TNA more maneuverability. But still they are between a rock and a hard place: between the diaspora and the government.... Many in the TNA are apprehensive about the diaspora putting up obstacles to negotiating something here. Going back to Vadukoddai Resolution<sup>4</sup> makes the TNA's job impossible. A united Sri Lanka is a given for any reasonable settlement.... But at the same time, the TNA will find it difficult to accept even the Thirteenth Amendment<sup>5</sup>.

Another analyst notes that “for the Tamil diaspora group to try to pursue the politics of the LTTE without the LTTE is politically naive and politically unviable ... The Kurds in Iraq, with U.S. protection, have less autonomy than what the TNA are still demanding today, without LTTE power”. Furthermore, a senior Western diplomat cautioned “the best you can hope for is to neutralize the effect of the diaspora, because it has been such a negative factor for so long” (International Crisis Group, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The narratives discussed above form an admittedly simplistic picture. For example, they exclude the Sri Lankan Muslim population, who have suffered significantly at the hands of the LTTE, but have not had a significant voice in political discussions. However, these narratives provide a sense of the enormity of the task ahead for the Sri Lankan government if it is indeed serious about establishing an enduring

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<sup>3</sup> The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is a Tamil political party that was largely seen as representing the interests of the LTTE until the end of the war. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) represents the Muslim communities concentrated in the east of the country.

<sup>4</sup> The Tamil United Liberation Front passed the Vadukoddai Resolution in 1976, which stipulated that only separation from the Sri Lankan state would resolve the Tamil community's problems.

<sup>5</sup> Under a peace agreement mediated by India in 1987, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution devolved a number of powers to the provinces. However, the Eastern Provincial Council was only set up in 2008 with limited powers, and the Northern Provincial Council remains inactive.

peace. If the government can allow international aid organizations into the internment camps, ensure the speedy and fair resettlement of internally displaced people, take steps to develop the economy of the war-affected provinces, end the persecution of journalists whose dissent has been hitherto seen as traitorous, and move towards a lasting political settlement that can foster inter-group trust, the government would be seen as Sri Lanka's most successful post-independence administration. In the long term, finding a common ground that unites Sinhalese and Tamil narratives is vital for a sustainable peace.

Given Sri Lanka's history, however, this remains a long shot. While Chirot's (2001) pessimism about the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka may feel unwarranted in light of the LTTE's military defeat, serious challenges remain. If the Sinhalese continue to demonstrate the collective narcissism that has been apparent since the war's end, the Tamils in Sri Lanka remain too intimidated to talk openly in the aftermath of the LTTE's demise, and the humiliation that the Tamils in Sri Lanka as well as the Tamil diaspora paralyzes future movement towards a permanent political solution, little hope for peace remains. The war may be over, but the hardest challenges—confronting and modifying the psychological factors that shape the beliefs and actions of the Sinhalese and Tamil communities— are still ahead.

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