The war’s over; now the real trouble starts

By Eranda Jayawickreme

There are good reasons to celebrate the Sri Lankan government’s final victory over the Tamil Tiger rebels last week. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were one of the most 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. The LTTE pioneered the use of the suicide bomber, killed two heads of state and tens of thousands of civilians, and pressed child soldiers into their ranks. During the final days of the Sri Lankan Army’s assault this past month, the Tigers shot Tamil civilians trapped as human shields if they attempted to flee. 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 that call Sri Lanka home. The president, Mahinda Rajapakse, was elected with support from the majority Sinhalese with a promise to end the war with the LTTE. This was achieved with high causalities sustained by an army made up mostly of Sinhalese youth (at least 6200 dead and wounded in the final three years of the war), and similarly high casualties suffered by the LTTE and by Tamil civilians caught in the crossfire. Given the tactics employed by the LTTE, many Sinhalese saw the war as largely a terrorist problem that threatened their homeland, and are now hopeful about their country’s future.

Tamils have been victims of systematic discrimination by successive post-independence Sinhalese-dominated governments. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which made Sinhala the sole official language of the country until 1987, was in part a reaction to the perceived favoring of Tamils over the majority Sinhalese by the British during colonial rule, and led to the first ethnic riots in 1958. The riots of 1983, which were 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 have been 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 Tamil diaspora represent a third, more radicalized perspective that has for the most part fostered and sided strongly with the LTTE. The Sri Lankan-British musician M.I.A.’s characterization of the conflict as “genocide” on Tavis Smiley’s PBS show in January captures the 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. The war’s end has left them humiliated and confused.
about the future of a struggle that they were both emotionally and financially invested in, as evidenced by their reluctance to accept the reality of Prabhakaran’s death.

These narratives are admittedly simplistic, but they do provide a sense of the enormity of the task ahead of Mahinda Rajapakse’s government if he is indeed serious about establishing an enduring peace. This is Mahinda’s moment. If he can allow international aid organizations into the internment camps, ensure the speedy 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 take meaningful steps towards a lasting political settlement that can foster inter-group trust, he will go down in history as Sri Lanka’s most successful leader. 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. If the Tamils in Sri Lanka remain too scared to talk openly in the aftermath of the LTTE’s demise, and if they end up feeling as humiliated as the Tamil diaspora feels now, there is little hope for peace. The war may be over, but the hardest challenges are still ahead.

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