

What the End of Civil War Means for Sri Lanka, and Why it Should Matter to the Rest of the World

Written by Ben Foulon

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BEN FOULON, JUL 27 2010

The Opportunity of a Generation

Five years before Hezbollah, ten years before Al Qaeda and Hamas, and 15 years before the Taliban, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was founded in the northern tip of Sri Lanka in 1976.

Although never garnering the same level of international publicity as the various Islamic extremist groups, the LTTE was arguably one of the most ruthless terrorist organizations in the world during its nearly 30-year-long conflict with the Sri Lankan government. Indeed, the LTTE pioneered tactics that have since been adopted by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, such as equipping suicide bombers with concealed belts filled with explosives (now a favorite of the Taliban and Al Qaeda) and using speedboats full of explosives for suicide attacks against naval targets (the technique that Al Qaeda used to bomb the U.S.S. Cole in 2000).

The LTTE began as one of many militias fighting for Tamil independence from the predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lanka. Over the course of the next three decades, the LTTE forcibly eliminated or absorbed all of the other Tamil separatist groups and consolidated its hold over the Tamil areas of the island, all the while waging an all-out civil war against the Sri Lankan government. Throughout the war, the LTTE employed ever more brutal tactics to fight against Sri Lankan forces and to preserve its power; these included the use of child soldiers, ethnic cleansing of Sinhalese and Muslim communities, killing of civilians (including Tamils), assassinations, and various forms of extortion and smuggling to raise funds.

To contemporary observers, it must have seemed like the conflict would never end. The civil war had all too many disturbing parallels with the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ongoing land dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the endless struggles plaguing many countries in Africa. Most of these conflicts are rooted in ethnic tensions, have involved state and non-state actors that manipulate and distort such sentiments – some of which, like the LTTE, have an active interest in prolonging the conflict – and have alternated between periods of all-out war and periods of ceasefire and regrouping. This vicious cycle, so prevalent in today's "modern" world, seemed doomed to permanently engulf Sri Lanka.

Then, fourteen months ago, the unthinkable happened: the LTTE was completely defeated and the 30-year-long civil war came to an end. In a remarkable, albeit ruthless three-year push, the Sri Lankan military overran the LTTE-controlled eastern coast and then turned north, captured Kilinochchi, the LTTE's administrative capital, and

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eventually trapped the LTTE in a tiny strip of land in the north of the island. As brutal as ever, the LTTE held hundreds of thousands of Tamils hostage in its miniscule enclave, using them as human shields against the advancing Sri Lankan Army and trying to use their suffering as leverage to pressure the Sri Lankan government to declare some sort of ceasefire. In one of the most moving episodes of the entire war, over 100,000 civilians flooded out of the LTTE-controlled zone through a breach created by the Sri Lankan Army in a section of the LTTE's fortifications.

Such desperate, despicable methods would be to no avail. By May 2009, the LTTE's territory had been reduced to the size of Central Park, and its remaining soldiers and core leadership were dying fast. Finally, in mid-May, the LTTE's leader and founder, Velupillai Prabhakaran, was killed, and the last remnants of the LTTE were subdued, with some of the more radical fighters preferring suicide attacks to surrender.

For the first time in nearly 30 years, Sri Lankan forces control the entire island and face no armed resistance from any militant groups. This advent of stability has provided the current Sri Lankan government, under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, with the opportunity of a generation: a chance to permanently turn the page on this violent chapter of Sri Lankan history and lay the foundation for lasting peace in Sri Lanka. Countries like Congo and Lebanon, which have been mired in civil wars for most of their existence, can only dream of a similar opportunity.

Challenges Loom Ahead, but the Biggest Obstacle is Gone

Tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils have existed for several centuries, but they became especially heightened after Sri Lanka's independence from Great Britain in 1948. In the next decade, acts passed by the Sinhalese-controlled Sri Lankan parliament denied citizenship and suffrage to the minority Tamils and made Sinhalese the sole official language of Sri Lanka. State-sponsored Sinhalese settlement of Tamil areas further worsened tensions between the two ethnicities. The dissatisfaction of the marginalized Tamils naturally provided fertile breeding ground for Tamil militant nationalist groups, like the LTTE, in the 1970s.

However, by 2003 the Tamils and their language had been legally incorporated into Sri Lanka, and Sinhalese settlement of Tamil areas had slowed. It then fell to the LTTE – the self-proclaimed defender of the Tamils and their rights – to facilitate reconciliation between the two ethnic groups and work with the government toward a permanent political settlement.

Instead, the LTTE disrupted attempts at lasting peace and actively worked to prolong the civil war. It assassinated scores of Tamil politicians and undermined any Tamil political party that was attempting to steer a course separate from LTTE aims. Ceasefires with the government were agreed upon out of convenience rather than a genuine desire to resolve the conflict. The LTTE used such ceasefires to rearm and regroup and would break them at opportune moments; in 2006, for example, the LTTE's attempt to stop the flow of water out of a major reservoir that supplied government-controlled villages ended the 2002 Norwegian-brokered peace accords, which were perhaps the closest the conflict ever came to a peaceful resolution.

Ultimately, the LTTE became a parasite of the civil war, making it an obstacle rather than a potential means to a peaceful settlement. With the military capability of the LTTE destroyed, this obstacle has been removed, providing an opportunity for a lasting resolution to the conflict.

For the Sri Lankan government, the task ahead will not be easy. Hundreds of thousands of civilians, mainly Tamils, remain displaced and need to be resettled. Much of the north remains damaged from the closing offensive of the war and needs to be repaired and rebuilt. Moreover, the Tamils are still uncertain of their place in a country controlled by a Sinhalese majority, and their concerns will need to be addressed to ensure that the recently-ended civil war will be Sri Lanka's last. But while the current challenges are tough, they will only get harder with time, and they are certainly easier now than they were when the LTTE was still at large.

Letting the Opportunity Slip Away

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Unfortunately for Sri Lanka, the government has acted aggressively in the months since the LTTE's defeat and has made little progress on resolving postwar issues that could fester into renewed violence if not dealt with relatively soon.

President Rajapaksa in particular has sought to use Sri Lanka's victory to his own personal advantage rather than to benefit the country as a whole. He held the presidential election a year earlier than scheduled in January, 2010 in order to capitalize from the end of the civil war. He won but then proceeded to arrest General Sarath Fonseka – who oversaw the Sri Lankan Army's victory over the LTTE and then ran in the presidential election – and at least 20 of his supporters in the military for allegedly plotting a coup against him: quite a heavy-handed move considering he won the election by 17 percentage points.

All the while, President Rajapaksa has continued the government's strict control over the media – with the president himself recently taking control of the Ministry of Mass Media and Information from his own minister – and its restrictions on civil liberties. Such measures may have been partly justified during the civil war, particularly given the LTTE's ruthlessness and skill in espionage, but with the LTTE defeated and no strong political opponents, keeping such measures in place seems excessive and will likely damage Sri Lanka's democratic institutions.

Most troubling of all, the government has made little progress in resettling the nearly 260,000 Tamil refugees. Instead, they have been left to languish in crowded, unsanitary, hastily-constructed camps that are both expensive to maintain and a growing source of resentment for those trapped inside. Perhaps during the war such mass internments were partly unavoidable and partly justified and may have very well led to the arrests of LTTE members that could have tried to infiltrate the populace and launch a guerilla campaign against the government. But now there is no excuse. The sooner the government can empty the camps the better, as it will rid them of a logistical and a political nightmare.

Further compounding the problem, the government has allowed Sinhalese families who had been evicted by the LTTE during the civil war to reclaim their land. While this may have been intended as a conciliatory gesture to Sinhalese victims of the civil war, this effort has turned somewhat ugly, with hundreds more families than were evicted attempting to claim land and with Tamils currently residing on some of the lands. Even if intended for all the right reasons, this effort could antagonize the Tamil refugees, who could view it as an example of state-sponsored Sinhalese settlement in Tamil areas and of neglect and discrimination of Tamil refugees.

Such aggressive and short-sighted policies, if continued, will likely harm the current government in the short run and the country as a whole in the long run. With overwhelming support for President Rajapaksa and his Sri Lanka Freedom party across the country since the defeat of the LTTE – having won eight provincial elections last year and 142 out of 255 seats in parliamentary elections this past April in addition to President Rajapaksa's resounding re-election – there was no need to arrest General Fonseka and to keep heavy-handed wartime measures in place. With the LTTE thoroughly decimated, there is no need to keep hundreds of thousands of Tamils detained in temporary camps. Any short-term political benefits any of these things could possibly yield would be superfluous at this point, and in the long run they risk sowing the seeds of future unrest and possibly civil war.

Why the Rest of the World Should Care

A renewed outbreak of civil strife would not only be tragic for Sri Lanka but also undesirable for the rest of the world. India in particular has a vested interest in a stable Sri Lanka, as there are 60.8 million Tamils residing in India, for which the civil war had been a very heated issue. Furthermore, India's three-year long peacekeeping tenure in northern Sri Lanka, in which it faced stout opposition from the LTTE and lost over 1000 men, is something India would like to forget, much less repeat.

In addition to India, other countries, like the United States, China and the European nations, would be worse off in the event of another Sri Lankan civil war. Such renewed chaos would hamper trade with Sri Lanka and, due to Sri Lanka's strategic position along the Indian Ocean trading routes, could even disrupt economic activity throughout South and Southeast Asia at a time when the climb out of global recession is still precarious at best.

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Moreover, renewed conflict would also likely breed other Tamil militant groups, and if any such groups were to become even half as ruthless as the LTTE was, it would present a significant problem not only for Sri Lanka but for the rest of the world as well. In its day, the LTTE was notorious for arms and drug smuggling. Furthermore, the LTTE had long been suspected of having contacts with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Al Qaeda, and potentially other ruthless terrorist organizations, and, indeed, such organizations adopted several techniques developed by the LTTE. The last thing that the rest of the world wants to see is the creation of another extremist group in the vein of the LTTE that would carry out such illicit activities and cooperate with other terrorist organizations, groups that have given the United States, Russia, Europe, and China a particularly hard time this past decade.

Given the potential negative effects of another outbreak of violence in Sri Lanka, it would seem that it is in the international community's interest to influence the resettlement and reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. The United States or the European Union (EU), or an organization like the IMF or the World Bank, could encourage the Sri Lankan government to resettle the Tamils from the camps by offering to fund such an action, with the release of funds contingent on the Sri Lankan government having a viable plan to resettle the refugees and having the ability to monitor the use of such funds and the progress of the operations, so as to ensure maximum efficiency of the aid. The government could hire Tamils from the camps to help with the resettlement process, as well as with the rebuilding and repair of areas damaged by the civil war. The United States and the EU could also help pay for the rebuilding of the northern areas, again making sure that they only agree to give funds if the Sri Lankan government presents a well-constructed plan to them and that the donors have some way of receiving feedback on the progress of their funds and of the operations they are funding.

Another course available to the United States, the EU, and other countries is to offer general economic incentives or threaten economic consequences if Sri Lanka does not begin resettlement or rebuilding in earnest or if it does not provide suitable rights or autonomy to Tamil areas. These could be in the form of trade agreements or sanctions. The EU in particular has an effective and easy-to-wield economic lever: access to the GSP plus, a preferential trade arrangement which allows increased access to EU markets through a reduction in tariffs. Just a couple of months ago, the EU revoked Sri Lanka's GSP plus status in response to the Sri Lankan government's questionable conduct toward human rights during the final phases of the civil war. The EU could easily offer to resume this arrangement with Sri Lanka if it notices progress toward resettlement or political autonomy for the Tamil areas.

The Lessons of the Sri Lankan Civil War

In addition to the practical concerns of the rest of the world, it is important to make sure that Sri Lanka handles its resettlement and reconciliation challenges effectively in order to ensure that one of Asia's oldest and most brutal conflicts is buried into history. So far, Sri Lanka has provided an interesting case for how today's seemingly perpetual conflicts around the world might be solved. Years of foreign mediation, from India's uninspiring peacekeeping effort in the late 1980s to Norway's well-intentioned but unsuccessful brokering of a peace agreement in 2002, proved ineffective in its attempts to end the conflict. Ultimately, it took a sweeping effort on the part of the Sri Lankan government to eradicate the LTTE and end the civil war. In many respects, the government's handling of the last phases of the conflict was heavy-handed, but it did prove to be effective.

Sri Lanka's example poses interesting questions about today's international peacekeeping and peace-brokering efforts around the world. While some sort of international involvement is ideal so as to prevent mass atrocities, like the ongoing tragedy in Darfur, perhaps it is possible for there to be *too much* international involvement, to the point where the conflict that the international community is trying to resolve only ends up getting prolonged and extra diplomatic or military involvement is rendered ineffective, as has been the case with Lebanon for over 20 years.

Finding the right balance is always tricky, and there is undoubtedly no general formula for every conflict, but it is important to recognize that more international aid, scrutiny, or involvement of some sort will not always help lead to conflict resolution. Recognizing the realities of the situation, particularly the motives of the people and organizations involved, is essential in determining how much involvement, if any, is appropriate. With regard to the civil war in Sri Lanka, the LTTE had an interest in prolonging the conflict, as the nature of the conflict attracted members and money

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to its organization, and the prospect of transitioning to a legitimate, internationally recognized political entity was incompatible with its methods of raising money and maintaining order. It was for good reason that the majority of the international community refused to recognize the Taliban's government in Afghanistan – it had draconian measures in its law code and derived most of its income from illicit opium trade – and the LTTE would have been no exception. Given these realities, perhaps it is not so surprising that the civil war was impossible to end until the LTTE had been eliminated. In this case, then, perhaps the most effective method for the international community to end the conflict was for it to stay uninvolved enough so that the Sri Lankan government would have enough leeway to eliminate the LTTE, which it had a definite interest, and, ultimately, the capability to do.

It is true that the end of the civil war was fairly heavy-handed as a result; indeed, perhaps the international community should have insisted that the Sri Lankan government accept help from the Red Cross with the wounded and from other organizations with building the temporary camps. But at least the fighting is over and lasting peace is possible. Perhaps the international community should adopt this approach more often: relaxing involvement to let a war *finish* with minimal casualties and damage and then focusing the bulk of its efforts on helping (or encouraging) those involved to move toward permanent resolution and normalization, whether that entails resettlement, repair, or something else.

Hence, it is time for the international community to help Sri Lanka with this last phase, not only for the benefit of itself and Sri Lanka, but for the possible application in other conflicts as well.

Ben Foulon is a student at Princeton University. He writes for Princeton's monthly magazine, 'American Foreign Policy', in which a shorter version of this article previously appeared.