The defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in brutal final battles in May 2009 reverberated around the world. An estimated one million Sri Lankan Tamils left the island over the three decades following the outbreak of civil conflict in 1983 settling in Europe, North America, Southeast Asia and Australia.

The immediate reaction to the manner of the defeat, the violence against civilians and attacks on hospitals, among these communities was one of anger. Major cities such as London, Ottawa and Sydney saw large demonstrations, hunger strikes and the lobbying of governments to intervene in Sri Lanka to stop what placards described as “genocide” against the Tamil people.

Almost eight years on from the final battles in north-eastern Sri Lanka, the anger has not subsided. However, and contrary to what many predicted at the time, the response of diaspora Tamils has not been resurgent support for the LTTE and armed struggle for a separate Tamil state. Rather, the response has been a commitment to international and national legal processes to chart the future of the island. In our research we seek to understand why the political orientation of overseas Tamil communities embraced non-violence and placed its faith in transitional justice. The answers can be found in Sri Lanka as well as in the countries of settlement.

The defeat of the LTTE was total. The military, political and civil structures established since the mid-1980s collapsed. Tamils in the diaspora had been prepared, or felt that they had no choice, to show support for the LTTE during the Civil War. With its defeat, the LTTE was shown of its status as the only group able to protect Tamil civilians. It lost the very basis of its appeal to Tamils abroad who were worried about friends and family at home, or of those who still believed that a separate state was achievable and violence might be necessary to accomplish it. As overseas Tamils put behind the asylum and refugee labels and embraced citizenship, there was an increasing sense of confidence in what it meant to be a Tamil abroad.

The nationalism of the LTTE, rooted in a centuries old dispute about the first settlers on the island, and an ideology reliant on a narrow and antagonistic construction of ethnicity and identity, chimed less and less with the values of internationalism and cosmopolitanism now familiar to second generation Tamils. Their new social identity gave them the confidence to challenge the politics of the past.

As with all established communities, Tamils in the West who trace their heritage to Sri Lanka have elites from the business, professional and political world. These campaign for justice, to hold those in power to account for past human rights abuses and war crimes, and advocate for a constitutional solution to the island’s problems. Western governments and international institutions engage with elites when pressured to do so. The government in Colombo, and indeed the political representatives of Tamils in Sri Lanka, remain cautious of the diaspora, wanting their investment but fearing them unreliable as allies.

The Sri Lankan case raises interesting broader questions about the factors that shape attitudes towards a political cause at home and the role of Tamils in the diaspora. The answers can be found in Sri Lanka as well as in the countries of settlement.

Faith in a constitutional, justice-based and internationally mediated way forward for Sri Lanka remains strong among overseas Tamils. However, the risk remains that if the reform, truth, and justice mechanisms do not deliver and reconciliation fails, then frustration among the diaspora will grow and positions will likely harden.

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