



Centre for Just Peace and Democracy


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**Political Identity of the British Tamil Diaspora:
Implications for Engagement**

Editorial Note

*The policy papers were produced in the context of the project *Diaspora Dialogues for Development and Peace*. We commissioned brief policy and background papers (mainly) from activists to get their views on how they perceive their political activism, as opposed to how outsiders view them. To generate as many policy papers as possible, reflecting diverse viewpoints, the project invited activists and academics via a “Call for Papers”. Since the majority of the papers were written by activists or by those who are both activists and academics, the papers cannot be viewed as a neutral account of the present history. Nonetheless, we believe that these are unique perspectives that are hardly recognized in the scholarly writing and should be given space for reflection.*

The views expressed are those of the authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of the Berghof Peace Support or any of its constituent agencies. Any comments or feedback should be addressed to the authors directly.

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Abstract

Recent years have seen marked changes in the scope, modes and scale of Tamil diaspora mobilization in Western states, especially in Britain. These changes are the result of major shifts in the diaspora political landscape in terms of the organisation, tactics, strategies and rationales of mobilization. The paper argues that diaspora mobilization is increasingly shaped by distinct identities – political, social and cultural - that have formed over time and are symptomatic of a community long resident in the West, and yet still closely tied to its place of origin. This paper seeks to contribute to the policy-relevant research on the British Tamil diaspora through an empirical tracing of important trends within it, and to demonstrate how and why certain forms of political activity are on the ascent. At a time when the international community is continuing to pursue long sought-after changes towards a lasting peace in Sri Lanka, these external efforts must necessarily engage with the diaspora if they are to be effective. Whilst there are divergences in the ideal outcome to Sri Lanka's ethnopolitical crisis sought by the international community and the diaspora, there are significant overlaps between the effects on the ground sought by each. These overlaps, which can be grouped into two broad themes – political reform and developmental/economic – are discussed against the new trends in diaspora mobilization.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen marked changes in the scope, modes and scale of Tamil diaspora mobilization in Western states (see Vimalarajah and Cheran 2010) which have prompted new scholarly and policy-related research agenda. The changes in Britain are particularly significant. Since 2006, British Tamils have participated in marches, protests, election campaigns and other forms of political activity in unprecedented numbers. Concomitantly, there have been major changes in the diaspora political landscape in terms of the organisations, tactics, strategies and rationales of mobilization. These changes have resulted, in part, from developments in Sri Lanka, including the resumption and intensification of the armed conflict in 2006 and its conclusion in May 2009 with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Just as importantly, these changes have also been heavily influenced by the embedding of the diaspora, and in particular the second generation and recently emerged organisations, in Western domestic political processes and emergent international praxis over the past two decades in relation to human rights, laws-of-war, democratisation, state reform and so on. In short, diaspora mobilization is increasingly shaped by distinct identities – political, social, and cultural – which have formed over time and are emblematic of a community long resident in the West, but closely tied to its places of origin.¹

This paper will discuss the changing forms of Tamil identity in the UK and, in particular, how they inform and shape diaspora mobilization. It seeks to contribute to the policy-relevant research on the British Tamil diaspora by empirically tracing important trends within it, and to demonstrate how and why certain forms of political activity are ascendant.² (In other words, it does not set out to contribute directly to the theoretical debates related to identity, diasporas, or political activism). Understanding the British Tamil identity underpinning the recent wave of mobilisation is indispensable for policy makers and other actors looking to engage the mainstream of the diaspora in the UK. Beginning with a brief discussion of how the terms identity and diaspora are used here, the paper then discusses the political content of Tamil diaspora

¹ The political identity of the British Tamil diaspora is not unitary; there continues to be a diversity of political projects which promote a range of political positions. However, the events and trends examined here are critical to understanding mainstream Tamil identity for the fact that they attracted the support of the majority of the British Tamil diaspora. For example, a mass demonstration in April 2009, during the final stage of the war in Sri Lanka, is illustrative of contemporary sentiment, drawing over 200, 000 participants – 100,000 according to police figures (BBC, 2009) i.e. half to two thirds of the estimated people of Sri Lankan Tamil descent living in Britain. By way of comparison, the biggest march in British history – in February 2003, against the impending invasion of Iraq – was attended by over one million of Britain's population of 62 million.

² This paper is based on the author's interviews and conversations with a range of British Tamil individuals, political activists, cultural figures and others in recent years, as well as the author's longer experiences as a member of the British Tamil community since the mid-eighties. First drafted in early 2010, the paper was updated in early 2011.

mobilization and the changing institutional structures and social contexts through which it is taking place. In concluding, the paper will also briefly explore the implications for policy makers and other seeking to engage politically with the Tamil diaspora.

The number of people of Sri Lankan Tamil origin permanently resident in Britain is estimated to be between 250, 000 and 300, 000.³ This population has been steadily increasing since the 1960s and grew especially after state repression and armed conflict intensified in the 1980s. From its earliest days, the diaspora has been engaged in forms of public, social and political activity that have affirmed an ongoing connection to the homeland in Sri Lanka's northeast. The surge of diaspora activity over the past three years, however, is characterised by a number of features that differentiate it from previous patterns of diaspora activity. Before proceeding, it is worth outlining some of these key trends.

Firstly, political mobilization towards Tamil collective (national) interests is now the mainstream in that the majority of Tamils have participated in political activity of some form – demonstrations, marches, lobbying, campaigning and so on – in relation to this. Secondly, this heightened activity has entailed previously less active sections of the population - in particular women and younger people - being well represented at the fore. Thirdly, the emergence of a new range of leaders and, especially, a new criterion of leadership (i.e. from cultural to political registers of legitimacy) Fourthly, Tamil public participation has coalesced, to a great extent, around political activity in relation to the Tamil question in Sri Lanka (see especially Nadarajah, Vimalarajah and Neuweiler 2011). By way of illustration, diaspora media reporting routinely prioritises Tamil political activity over cultural and social issues or events. Finally, the symbols, colours and rituals associated with a Tamil national identity have increasingly become mainstream in political and even social events.⁴

2. Conceptual Clarification: Identity and Diaspora

Identity is one of the most complex and contested issues in political philosophy and the social sciences. It is impossible, therefore, to defend or condemn any particular definition as absolutely right or entirely wrong. A more plausible approach is to advocate a particular definition as more or less useful for a specific end. The term identity captures the types of cultural, social and political activity through which individuals express a sense of themselves. Individuals have important personal and shared identities - for example, as members of families, circles of friends

³ Whilst there are no definitive figures, these numbers are reflected in public participation in mass rallies, and from disparate research. The Tamil Chamber of Commerce (TCC), for example, estimated in March 2011 that there are five thousand Tamil-owned businesses in UK with a turnover of GBP2 billion. See also note 2 above.

⁴ This does not mean that there is universal acceptance of these symbols, and rituals, but their significance is universally understood and accepted. For example, some Tamils don't accept the Tamil national flag, but they recognise that the flag is intended by its advocates to signify the Tamil nation. In other words, the dispute is about which flag, rather than whether the Tamil collective – nation – exists.

or within their work lives. Individuals also engage in activities to express their membership of wider collectives such as political causes, religious congregations or cultural groups. In this paper, the term identity is used to capture individuals' expressions of belonging to wider social and political collectives or groups - those identities that have come to assume strategic importance in political mobilization. Following Benedict Anderson (1983), the term identity is used here to capture the idea of membership to 'imagined communities' - in the sense that most individuals will never know all the other members of the wider political, cultural or religious groups with which they identify. By expressing their membership of these wider groups, individuals identify themselves to outsiders, to themselves, and to other members of the group as sharing political, religious or cultural values with members of the group in a socially and/or politically significant way.

The use of the term identity to denote collectives in this way is not meant to suggest insight into the actual subjective experiences, or motivations, individuals might have but simply the public meanings signalled by their collective social and political activities. Individuals may have multiple types of more or less conscious motivations and reasons for engaging in public forms of political or social activity. However, the identities individuals express by taking part in public activities are invariably socially mediated and are often unconnected to their own personal motivations. For example, British Tamils' reasons for attending a Tamil cultural event may be various, more or less conscious and mutually inconsistent. Some may attend because family members or friends were attending, others for conscious and deeply held aesthetic preferences, whilst others still may feel it necessary to attend in order to maintain their social and cultural status within the community. Despite the plausible existence of a wide range of incongruent reasons, the Tamils who attend are taking part in an activity whose public meanings of what it is to be a 'good Tamil' are social and collective rather than individual and private. Attending a cultural event to celebrate and promote Carnatic music or Bharathanatyam dance means, more or less consciously, taking part in an event that prioritises these forms as aesthetically valuable and important for being a 'good Tamil'.

Similarly, the term diaspora has also generated a range of somewhat disparate definitions. Some definitions use the term diaspora to label an entire population group that lives outside of a state or territory that can be identified by an outsider as the population's homeland. In this paper however, the term diaspora will be used in a much more limited sense. It will be used to cover a set of institutions or public practices through which individuals of Sri Lankan Tamil descent explicitly express a significant connection to a homeland in Sri Lanka. Being diasporic is not a matter of birth but one of explicit, and public, identification. As it is used here, the term diaspora would not cover an individual of Sri Lankan Tamil descent who has no conscious or implicit sense of a significant connection to a homeland in Sri Lanka. It would only be extended to those individuals and institutions who engage in practices, for whatever their personal motivation, that publicly signify a continuing political, cultural or social link to a homeland in Sri Lanka.

3. Diaspora Activity up to 2006

A major element of diaspora public activities from the early 1970s until the turn of the century have been organisations and projects that sought to retain cultural and social connections with the homeland. Tamils who came to Britain as young or mature adults often established alumni associations linked to their homeland schools, as well as town and village welfare associations to maintain close and familial ties with their specific places of origin. These associations hosted cultural and social events for their diaspora members and frequently provided financial support for schools, villages and towns in the homeland. The past pupil associations in particular were important in promoting sporting activities in hostlands and many associations formed cricket, football, netball and athletics teams from former students and even recruited the children of former students. These contributed – and continue to do so – significant spaces in the Tamil diaspora’s social web.

Another important form of diaspora activity is the Tamil weekend school. There are an estimated 40 Tamil schools in London alone and most offer a curriculum of Tamil language along with music and dance classes and sometimes religious studies (Saivite and Christian). Typically, Tamil schools were established by first generation members of the diaspora to ensure that the second generation retained a Tamil cultural identity. The schools’ curricula define Tamil cultural identity as a familiarity with the Tamil language and Tamil cultural forms, particularly Carnatic music and Bharathanatyam dance. In addition to regular classes during term time, Tamil schools also hold student performances where the emphasis is on preserving and cultivating distinctly Tamil cultural forms. These types of activities provide a very rich associational life that has preserved the sense of being a member of the Tamil diaspora with cultural and social links to the homeland in Sri Lanka amongst significant sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil population.

Alongside this, meanwhile, there have also been significant expressions of Tamil political identity aimed at securing Tamil political rights, broadly defined, in Sri Lanka. There were regular protest marches and rallies in London to highlight the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils both as a result of Sri Lankan government policies and the armed conflict. For example, an estimated 8,000 people participated in a protest march in November 1995 to highlight the civilian casualties and mass displacements caused by the Sri Lankan government’s military offensive on the Jaffna population. At the time, it was arguably the largest Tamil political gathering in UK. Since 1995, an annual remembrance day for the Tamils who died as a result of the war has also been held. Although since the proscription of the LTTE in 2001 visible manifestations of the Tamil nationalist movement have become far more circumspect the Heroes Day event (later renamed Remembrance Day) on Nov 27 has drawn ever increasing attendance. During the nineties Tamil expatriate participation in social and cultural events was far more widespread and prevalent than participation in political events. Only a minority of diaspora members participated in protest marches and annual Remembrance Day events; for example, a total of 600 people attended the

1996 Remembrance Day event held in Acton. In contrast, the Tamil business directories produced from 1998 onward show a large number of Tamil schools, old school and village associations.

The dominance of social and cultural activity had served to create a sense in which Tamil culture and Tamil politics were kept separate. Expressing a Tamil cultural identity demanded certain types of dress and familiarity with Tamil cultural forms whilst expressing a Tamil political identity entailed making specific political demands, including that of self-determination ('a political solution') and political independence ('Tamil Eelam'). The criteria of leadership and influence at the time were distinct. There were figures clearly identified as political leaders: the leaders of organisations such as the United Tamils Organisation (UTO) or the British Tamil Association (BTA) and, from 1999, the LTTE's political strategist Anton Balasingham. However, there were another set of individuals recognised as leading cultural figures who often enjoyed a distinct and important status within the community. Cultural leaders included head teachers of prominent (diaspora) Tamil schools, leaders of old school, village and town associations, important committee members of Hindu temples or members of the Christian clergy. Political leaders and cultural leaders therefore existed in distinct spheres of influence and cultural leaders were often able to assert and maintain their status regardless of their political associations. Despite their distinct spheres of influence, political and cultural leaders during this period were marked by a similar set of social characteristics: they were invariably male, middle aged and first generation members of the diaspora.

4. Diaspora Activity after 2006

4.1 Politics moves centre-stage

Since 2006 political, rather than cultural or social, activity has increasingly been established as the dominant mode of expressing Tamil diaspora identity, even though the others continue undiminished. Political events, projects and activities are now attended by tens of thousands of participants and are extensively covered in the Tamil media. Although cultural events continue to take place, it is political events, both in Sri Lanka and in western diaspora centres, which are covered at length in the diaspora media's news coverage, commentary and public discussion. Thus, television, radio and newspapers give priority coverage to political events - while cultural events, although covered, are subordinated to politics.⁵

The growing importance of political activity has been associated with a massive increase in the extent of, and commitment to, public participation. In the years leading up to 2009, participation in protest marches rarely exceeded the ten thousand mark. The two big protest marches of 2009, however, each drew some 100,000 - 200,000 participants. The Parliament Square

⁵ Also in contrast to the 1980s and early 1990s, there are now scores of newspapers and websites and several satellite television and radio stations serving the global diaspora audience.

protests (Westminster, London) were sustained for 24 hours over a period of 72 days and numbers attending sometimes reached 20,000 per day, overflowing onto the streets nearby. Attendance at the annual Remembrance Day events has also seen a steep increase in the past decade: between 1995 and 1999 participation increased from 600 to 6,000 and since then has risen steadily to around 50,000 at the 2009 and 2010 events. The funeral of the LTTE's theoretician Anton Balasingham in December 2006 attracted 40,000 mourners. The 'Pongu Thamil' rally in 2003 drew 10,000 attendees, but in 2008 drew over 30,000.

The expanding scope of mobilization, meanwhile, has brought new sections of the diaspora population into political activity. In contrast to previous political and cultural events, women and younger members of the diaspora⁶ played a far more visible role as leaders and organisers of the marches, protests, and grass-roots campaigns. The marches and protests also drew women from across the generations and along with the increased participation of young women there was a visible presence of young mothers, middle aged and elderly women. This was especially evident during the mass protests in Parliament square. In contrast to the older generation of political and cultural activists, new forms of political activity include men and women in almost equal numbers. Significantly, younger activists do not share their parents' reserve about working with members of the opposite sex. Today, routine political – as well as social and cultural - activities by Tamil youth groups, including Tamil societies in universities see equal representation of both sexes.

Crucially, the younger demographic of the recent protests is associated with a dual political identity in which Tamil social, cultural and political identities – the latter centring on a commitment to, and solidarity with, Tamils in Sri Lanka - is combined with a clear sense of British citizenship. Many older diaspora members had a sense of cultural and social displacement and often thought of themselves as refugees in exile from the homeland. In contrast, the younger generation have either been born in Britain or have spent most of their lives here and as such combine a commitment to ending what they see as the oppression of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka with a clear sense of Britain being 'home'. This commitment to Tamil political concerns in Sri Lanka, alongside integration into the British cultural and political mainstream, is reflected in the symbols, political language, organisational forms and modes of activity evident during the recent phase of political mobilisation.

4.2 Themes of Mobilization

The new political identity has been expressed through political demonstrations and campaigning about three key overlapping themes: genocide, human/humanitarian rights and Tamil national rights. These three themes reinforce each other in important ways. The assertion of a Tamil national identity has been central to Tamil politics for over thirty years. Tamil nationalists argue that the Tamils constitute a nation with a distinct homeland whose political status on the island should be equal to that of the Sinhalese. They reject the argument made by

⁶ The term young is used here to refer to people in their late teens or twenties.

Sinhala nationalists, and some international actors, that Tamils are a minority in a Sinhala dominated island and that the Tamil national identity cannot be given equal political recognition to that of the Sinhalese. Tamil nationalists assert that numerical minority should not be equated with political inferiority and argue that their status on the island should be equivalent to that of the Scots in the United Kingdom or the Québécois in Canada.

The theme of genocide overlaps with the Tamil nationalist discourse in important ways. Firstly, Tamil nationalists assert that their political demands for recognition arise because of Sri Lanka's history of genocidal violence over the past sixty years. They argue that Tamil national rights must be recognised in order to safeguard the Tamil nation from further violence by the Sri Lankan state. The human rights / humanitarian frameworks are extensively used to criticise and highlight the policies and practices of the Sri Lankan state. These frameworks also serve to augment the assertion that the Sri Lankan state's violence is genocidal and can only be checked through the international community's explicit recognition of the Tamil nation's rights.

The ongoing commitment to Tamil national identity and its association with the themes of genocide and human / humanitarian rights was evident in the symbols, placards and slogans of recent diaspora political activity. Tamil national symbols, including the wishbone shaped map of Tamil Eelam, the national flag⁷ and red and yellow colours, were prevalent. Despite the possible legal implications posed by the 2001 proscription of the LTTE many protestors visibly displayed and carried national symbols during marches and at the Parliament square protests. National symbols were also increasingly worn on the body (pendents, rings, etc.) rather than simply held aloft or printed on placards; a trend that was particularly marked among the younger generation of protestors.

Crucially, these practices are inspired by younger protestors' familiarity with forms of protest and identification prevalent in the West. This included red and yellow face paint, hair ribbons, the use of the national flag as a cape, caps, badges bearing the national flag or outline of the Tamil homeland and a proliferation of T-shirts with national symbols. The innovative and novel use of Tamil nationalist symbols to mark the body in this way suggests that the younger generation have a sense of 'owning' the Tamil nationalist struggle; Tamil nationalism is not something that 'belongs' to an older generation but has been refashioned through new cultural forms and idioms of protest. Meanwhile, Tamil rap and hip hop performers who raise awareness

⁷ The Tamil Eelam flag, similar to the LTTE's own flag, has been widely – although not universally - adopted by many Tamils in the UK and other diaspora centres as the Tamil national flag. This can be compared by the Indian National Congress' flag (used during its campaign against British rule) becoming more widely accepted as representative of the popular sentiment of independence from British rule, and later, with some changes, as the national flag of India. Interestingly, the Indian National Congress and its flag were also proscribed by British officials during certain periods in the 1930s and 1940s with public displays of proscribed symbols carrying penalties - including imprisonment. Similarly, in early 2011, the Libyan uprising against Mummur Gaddafi's rule quickly adopted the flag of the monarchy that ruled before his 1969 coup. The use of this flag is clearly not intended as a symbol of support for the monarchy, but as a symbol of liberation from the Gaddafi regime's rule.

of the Tamil cause through their music are a striking example of the new cultural idioms of protest that no longer require familiarity with Tamil cultural forms – Carnatic music, for example.

The themes of genocide and human / humanitarian rights were also explicit in the political identity articulated by recent diaspora protests. Slogans and placards portrayed the violence and suffering endured by the Tamils, demanded greater humanitarian action by the UN and other agencies, increased media attention to the plight of the Tamils and international action to halt Sri Lanka's genocide of the Tamils. Important Tamil nationalist political organisations, such as the British Tamil Forum (BTF) and the Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO), also frequently employ the language of genocide and human rights/ humanitarian frameworks in their criticism of the Sri Lankan state and in justifying their demands for Tamil national recognition. This nomenclature has also become pervasive in the Tamil language with Tamil terms for genocide (*inna kollai*) and human rights violations (*manitha urumai meeralhal*) now prevalent in Tamil language political discussions. This is in contrast to alternative forms of Tamil identity possible – for example, there is little recourse to civilisational arguments (such as many centuries of Tamil political community and rule in south India and Sri Lanka) as the basis for Tamil political rights today. In short, although the community whose rights are to be secured is Tamil, there is nothing inherent to the Tamil identity that provides the basis for these rights. The basis for these rights are, rather, universalist principles of rights, justice, individual freedom, responsibility to protect (R2P), etc. (See also Nadarajah and Sentas 2011).

4.3 New Frames of Activism

In contrast to earlier forms of diaspora political mobilization, the recent period has also been marked by the diaspora's engagement with a range of British institutions beyond the government of the time. During the protests in Westminster, Tamil activists built relationships with MPs from across the political spectrum, expanding from the usual base of the Labour party. These engagements are now also sustained (rather than episodic as earlier), with political parties (rather than individual MPs), and substantive (rather than focussing on specific issues, such as individual instances of rights abuses in Sri Lanka, or abstract principles, such as self-determination or Tamil Eelam). Tamil activists have also increasingly sought to link up with international advocacy campaigns – on human rights, media freedom, ethical consumerism, etc. – based on overlapping concerns in Sri Lanka, as well as with other communities' activities – Palestinians, Kosovars, Kurds, etc. – based on similar political goals. Tamil activists have actively, and successfully, sought coverage for their protests and other activities from both the London based and national media as reaching the British public was felt to be of critical importance. British Tamil university students have also begun organising societies in their respective institutions to campaign against what they term Sri Lanka's genocide of the Tamils. These societies, which have increased significantly in the past two decades, were prominent in the organisation of the protest marches, and one of the most visible manifestations of a new generation of Tamils whose individual identities are now closely intertwined with their British upbringing and education.

It is also important to note a shift in what can loosely be termed the geographical frameworks of Tamil diaspora organisation. Diaspora activists are forming a new set of organisations and institutions that mirror the present geographical and political realities of the diaspora, including new relationships to the territory of the homeland. Organisations such as BTF, TYO and the Transitional Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), which have become prominent in diaspora politics, manage their activities and administration in relation to the geographical location of the host countries, rather than the homeland. The membership and activities of BTF and TYO are organised in relation to British regions rather than to the places of origin in the homeland – such as Jaffna in the north, or Batticaloa in the east. In other words, the specificities of origin in the island are of little importance (by comparison, for example, to past-pupil or village associations – see below). This marks the prominence, and consolidation, of a ‘Tamil’ collective identity. Meanwhile, the fledgling TGTE is seeking to organise representation of Tamils and administration of its activities on a host country level – so that Tamil delegates represent specific Tamil diaspora centres such as Britain, France or Malaysia. Such developments have opened up three levels of political activity for the British Tamil diaspora; the regional, the national (UK) and the global.

This is not to suggest that the connection with the Tamil homeland has been lost, rather that it has been re-orientated. The map of Tamil Eelam has a ubiquitous presence in Tamil public culture; the outline of Tamil Eelam is found on pendants and T-shirts and has a pervasive presence in the Tamil media. The term ‘homeland’ is also widely used in English, whilst the Tamil terms *thayagam* (motherland) and *thesiam* (nation) capture the same meanings. However, the ubiquitous presence of the term homeland and the Eelam image on objects, with which Tamil nationalism was physically embodied, reflects a changing relationship to the territory contained in the map. Diaspora fundraising – to support orphanages in Sri Lanka, for example – seeks contributions from individuals on the basis that they are Tamil, rather than Tamils originating from a particular location.

Older members of the diaspora often had connections to specific institutions or locales, as demonstrated by village and alumni associations. They maintained financial and social ties with specific places and it was common for their social activities within the diaspora to be mediated through these institutionally or regionally focussed associations. Conversely, the younger generation, who are likely to have been born or spent most of their lives outside Sri Lanka, have a commitment to the homeland as ‘national’ territory rather than to a specific place or school. This sense of Tamil Eelam as ‘national’ territory was reinforced during the peace process and after the Tsunami when many young diaspora activists visited the Tamil speaking areas. Most diaspora activists spent time in the Vanni and used these experiences to form their understanding of ‘homeland’ - in place of the specific houses, villages or towns of their own or parents’ birth. It is worth noting, however, that the older generation of Tamils now operate within this de-centred concept of Tamils collectively ‘over here’ having to help Tamils collectively ‘over there’.

Whilst most of the younger diaspora activists have a deep commitment to the protection of the ‘homeland’, they often have a limited awareness of and familiarity with the specific locales

of their own ancestries. This shift is best captured in the changed significance of the question ‘where are you from?’ when directed from one member of the diaspora to another. For the older generation of activists this question referred, invariably, to the specific village or town of their ancestry and important social connections. For the younger generation, it refers (depending on context) to the area of London, the UK or other diaspora centre in which they normally reside.

4.4 Representation and leadership

The recent Tamil diaspora political mobilization has seen changes in political leadership – in other words, those seen as credible representatives or ambassadors of the community. Previous Tamil leaders were almost exclusively male and an important basis of their claim to ‘leadership’ was a familiarity with, and reverence for, traditional Tamil cultural forms. However, in the new dynamics of diaspora politics, leadership no longer requires cultural or gender attributes. The qualifications for political leadership are a commitment to, and an ability to promote articulately, the Tamil political cause. For example, two of the most recognisable faces of Tamil representation include M.I.A, the Grammy Award nominated musician, and Jan Jananayagam, the anti-genocide campaigner, who both gained legitimacy amongst the Tamil Diaspora public for their outspokenness on Sri Lanka’s conduct towards Tamils and, crucially, for their ability to articulate Tamil issues to wider (non Tamil) audiences. Neither had to project a familiarity with Tamil cultural forms or norms to garner this legitimacy.

The growing importance of political activity as a significant expression of Tamil diaspora identity has therefore led to changing patterns of status, influence and power. Cultural leaders, whose status arise from their cultural or social activities, are not necessarily politically influential among the diaspora - even though they retain their cultural influence. Cultural leaders are not invited to be political commentators in the Tamil media, nor are they sought out as public speakers at political events or as Tamil representatives at political meetings. In short, individuals can become politically influential only through their effective and committed articulation of the Tamil cause, regardless of whatever other legitimacy they may have. The political influence of organisations like the BTF and TYO, as well as individual activists such as Jan Jananayagam and M.I.A, rests on this principle.⁸

Meanwhile, the growing importance of political activity in the representation of diaspora identity is also beginning to have an effect on cultural and social associations. The Tamil national identity is increasingly an anchor that is re-orientating the activities of many non-political

⁸ The dynamics of Jan Jananayagam’s campaign in mid-2009 for the European Parliamentary elections is emblematic of many of the trends in contemporary Tamil diaspora mobilisation discussed here. It was on the basis of her history of advocacy for Tamil rights, in particular her anti-genocide campaigning, that several Tamil groups approached her to stand as an independent candidate for London in the MEP election. Although her election campaign, which relied almost entirely on grass-roots mobilization, began just four weeks before the June election (many other candidates had begun campaigning two years ahead of the poll), she amassed the highest votes historically by an independent MEP candidate in Britain (over 50,000). The grass-roots campaign brought together many Tamil diaspora organisations, as well as many ordinary Tamils, who campaigned for her door-to-door, in their workplaces, social circles and so on. Her manifesto prioritized her anti-genocide stance, as well as civil liberties and asylum rights in Britain.

associations in a number of ways. Many cultural and social associations played visible roles in the recent protest marches and actively canvassed members to support Jananayagam's candidacy. There are also increasing rituals to mark the Tamil national identity at cultural and social events. For example, religious organisations now regularly include prayers for the casualties and suffering consequent to the Sri Lankan government violence and policies. Cultural events now regularly involve Bharathanatyam and Carnatic music performances on the themes of Tamil national suffering and resistance. In short, the once sharp distinction existing between cultural and political domains is blurring as Tamil national identity is increasingly established in the mainstream of diaspora activity.

5. Engagement with the International Space⁹

From the mid 1990s and particularly after the Norwegian-led peace process in Sri Lanka (which began circa 2001), a key focus of Tamil diaspora political activity centred directly on urging international support for the LTTE – or, for a minority, opposing this. A number of factors underpinned this. Firstly, the LTTE had become the highest body of the Tamil cause, especially with the gradual establishment of a *de facto* state centred in Vanni (Stokke 2007). Secondly, and concomitantly, the central themes that Tamil mobilization was concerned with – genocide, human/humanitarian rights and Tamil national rights – came to be aligned with the LTTE's project. Its stated goal of self-determination and an independent Tamil Eelam, its military campaign serving as a bulwark against the Sri Lankan state violence and discriminatory policies (especially state-sponsored colonization of Tamil areas), and as (the only) leverage for political concessions from the state, made the LTTE the locus of much of the diaspora mobilization.

While this did not mean that Tamils agreed with all its actions, the above-mentioned goals and actions engendered considerable support amongst diaspora Tamils. However, this also made it very difficult for Tamils to engage on this basis with governments and other actors in host states, difficulties considerably intensified by the proscription of the LTTE by the United States (in 1997), United Kingdom (in 2001), and European Union (in 2006). In particular, terrorism proscriptions considerably reduced the opportunities and spaces to engage with host governments and others on the central themes of Tamil mobilization. Meanwhile, however, the protracted Norwegian-led peace process, whilst ultimately a failure, opened up considerable spaces for many diaspora Tamils to engage in political, humanitarian and other activities vis-à-vis the Tamil struggle. For example, many diaspora Tamils were able to engage in humanitarian assistance, both in terms of raising funds and in practical projects in LTTE-held areas. As part of its state-building project, the LTTE also adopted a *laissez-faire* approach (albeit carefully monitored) to encouraging Tamil diaspora engagement in civil society activities in areas under its control. This accelerated after the devastating tsunami in 2004, which struck the northeast areas

⁹ This is based, in part, on Sentas and Nadarajah (draft, undated)

of the island the most. In short, the web of interactions between the diaspora and Tamils in the northeast – demonstrated by the diaspora alumni and village societies – expanded.

Moreover, the final stage of Sri Lanka's war (2006-2009) took place under very different conditions to its earlier phases. For one, it was arguably the most internationalized phase, in that the involvement and practices of Western governments, the Sri Lankan state, the LTTE, UN agencies, NGOs etc., were highly visible. In particular, Tamil diaspora media had developed considerably since the 1990s, enabling almost real time coverage, commentary and analysis of events 'on the ground' (in the northeast) as well as political developments in Sri Lanka and the international sphere. The rapid transmission of information, as well as the technological networks that facilitated discussion amongst diaspora Tamils were in stark contrast to the earlier decades of the conflict. Whilst reports of developments in Sri Lanka were often delayed by days, and photographs and video footage took several days or even weeks to emerge, the final phase of the war was marked by same-day reporting, in considerable detail: for example, the mass casualties and displacement of Tamil populations in the northeast were reported on the same day. The horrific account of the final months of war discussed in detail in the April 2011 report by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon's experts' panel on war crimes in Sri Lanka, were routinely reported day-by-day in real time on satellite television, websites, and print media. In short, the diaspora was well informed about Sri Lanka's war.

Moreover, there were important shifts in international norms that began in the late nineties, and have accelerated in the past decade. These include, on the one hand, the processes of the 'War on Terror' that ensued after September 11, 2001, but also the intensified West-led efforts in the developing world to promote liberal peace – liberal democracy, market economics and the rule of law – concomitant with an important recasting of state sovereignty alongside principles that have today led to the growing pursuit of the 'Responsibility To Protect'. These now widely embedded processes in themselves opened up 'new' spaces and frameworks for diaspora engagement with governments and other actors in host states.

All these conditions contributed to the increased mobilization, that quickly occurred after the war resumed in 2006, toward heightened diaspora political activity. Crucially, the developments in Sri Lanka, in particular, resulted in diaspora engagement changing to focus on the key themes - genocide, human/humanitarian rights and Tamil national rights – beyond the framework of mobilising support for the LTTE *per se*, although this also continued. Many of the key institutions of diaspora mobilization – BTF, TYO, and others – came to the fore after 2006 and did so in a homeland/hostland/international context that made the earlier supposed diaspora groupings of pro- or anti-LTTE increasingly untenable. This was connected with many diaspora Tamils' direct and expanding engagement with governments, political parties and other actors in hostlands on developments in Sri Lanka.

6. Implications for Engagement

The Tamil diaspora has long been a key stakeholder in the outcome of Sri Lanka's protracted and ongoing ethno-political crisis. The diaspora continues to have strong familial, marital, community and economic connections to the island. For example, the landmark annual Nallur Temple festival in Jaffna attracts tens of thousands of diaspora Tamils during periods of stability, such as during the Norwegian-led peace process. As discussed above, while some of its members have long been politically active in host countries, the ever increasing numbers of those participating in political projects in recent years, and the intensity and complexity of their efforts, has amply demonstrated that the diaspora will continue to have a profound impact on the Tamil question and other dynamics in Sri Lanka. At a time when the international community is actively continuing to pursue long-sought-after changes towards a lasting peace in Sri Lanka it is thus clear that these external efforts must necessarily include and engage with the diaspora if they are to be effective. This fact has been explicitly recognised by some governments, such as the United States (Blake 2009).

The context and modalities of engagement between the diaspora, on the one hand, and governments, NGOs, political parties and other actors in their host states, on the other hand, has changed significantly in recent years. Prior to the end of the armed conflict, diaspora engagement was heavily mediated by anti-terrorism proscription and associated security regimes. This has changed in recent years, not least because diaspora Tamils have in taking up their political advocacy increasingly shed their concerns about being dubbed supporters of the LTTE (and thus of terrorism) simply by virtue of their political positions on self-determination, Tamil Eelam, and so on. Conversely, this lack of inhibition and the end of the war with the exit of the LTTE has opened up mutually beneficial spaces for host governments and others to engage with Tamil activists and leading diaspora organisations. In Britain, for example, all major parties have comfortable and developing links with the Tamil community.

Clearly there are, at present, divergences in the ideal outcomes to Sri Lanka's ethno-political crisis sought by the international community and the diaspora. For example, the former hopes for a single, stable state committed to liberal democracy whose economy is well connected to global flows. The majority of the diaspora – and many Tamils in Sri Lanka, it is contended here – prefer secession, or at the very least substantial autonomy from Colombo. However, given that the drivers of this diaspora sentiment are closely linked to the policies and conduct of the Sinhala dominated Sri Lankan state (see Nadarajah, Vimalarajah and Neuweiler 2011), there are in fact significant overlaps between the effects on the ground sought by the international community and the diaspora. These overlaps can be grouped into two broad themes – political reform and development.

In political terms, there is growing international recognition that the centralised, unitary and ethnically hierarchical Sri Lankan state needs substantial reform. In addition, there are concerns about corruption and lack of the rule of law (including impunity for human rights

abuses), media freedom, robust and independent judicial processes, and so on. The diaspora has been at the forefront of efforts to highlight these particular issues, alongside international human rights groups and other issue-based external actors. Arguably, the key difference is that the diaspora is sceptical that these changes can be achieved incrementally by external advocacy, or even pressure. Nonetheless, the diaspora has definite and nuanced views of what practical reforms are required, as well as of the concrete impact of these not being implemented. In the meantime, there are specific sub-issues – such as the proper implementation of land and language rights – that already provide common ground for the diaspora and international community to engage on.

The second group of issues are development-related. They include, on the one hand, humanitarian and rehabilitation concerns, and on the other, economic issues. Sri Lanka's war has mostly been fought in Tamil-speaking areas of the island, which have been almost completely devastated by three decades of high-intensity fighting. The northeast is today highly militarised and largely closed off to the outside world as a result of government restrictions on access – as explicitly noted by the international humanitarian organisations and Western governments such as the United States (Blake 2011). The humanitarian crisis in the northeast is acute, and has been for decades. These are concerns which are not only at the heart of the diaspora's political advocacy, but also dominate its substantial non-governmental humanitarian efforts. Following the February 2003 cease-fire, the diaspora invested heavily in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the northeast. During this period, the diaspora's energy and resources were important in rehabilitating the Vanni regions from the devastation caused by earlier phases of war, and the December 2004 tsunami. Since before the armed conflict, community groups, including village and past-pupil associations, have supported humanitarian and developmental efforts in the northeast and this practice continues today, despite the physical, political (and bureaucratic), and extra-judicial obstacles caused by the Sri Lankan state's policies and practices. As such, the diaspora remains a key actor if (market-led) international efforts to revive and reconstitute the economy in the northeast are to succeed. An internationally mediated mechanism of distributing humanitarian assistance and development aid can productively engage the diaspora's energy, resources and skills for the reconstruction and rehabilitation process. It is also worth noting that the northeast will have to be restored to some semblance of normalcy before a serious political process can gain traction, and engaging the diaspora in these processes will engender a sense of ownership and investment before a formal political process is initiated.

Alongside development of the northeast, and in relation to this, a key area of overlap between international efforts and the diaspora's is the need for robust and durable economic reform in Sri Lanka. The diaspora would undoubtedly engage with a credible agenda of economic liberalisation, not least because this would involve scaling back Sri Lanka's bloated public sector, and creating the spaces in which diaspora capital, expertise and connections can be used productively in the revival of the (north-eastern) economy. Sri Lanka's ever expanding public sector has always been viewed by Tamils as a vector of discrimination and economic exclusion. Not only is the public sector overwhelmingly Sinhalese, its practices have also served to marginalise and constrain Tamil private-sector activity. It is worth noting that diaspora actors also

invested heavily in Colombo during the Norwegian-led peace process, and substantial economic links persist - despite Sri Lanka's increasingly autarkic economic policies. In other words, they have a thorough appreciation of economic dynamics both in Sri Lanka and in their host countries.

In summary, the common ground between the international community efforts and the diaspora's comprises the establishment of a just and durable political solution, the resolution of the humanitarian and human rights crises, and longer-term reconstruction and development. International engagement with the diaspora, however, can only be productive if it is in line with, and aware of, the trends in diaspora political mobilization. In short, there must be engagement with diaspora actors who are politically influential and legitimate. It is undeniable that these would be actors on a Tamil nationalist platform (i.e. those who see the Tamils and Sinhalese as distinct and equally valuable collectives in terms of their political rights and demands). In other words, they will argue for the recognition and protection of the Tamil nation, and the Tamil homeland. As with the example of the Scots and the Québécois, these sentiments find broad support amongst the diaspora and Tamils on the island – the form in which this recognition and protection comes to be enshrined (substantial autonomy or independence) is a question to be answered if and when there is genuine political progress in Sri Lanka.

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