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Berghof Peace Support

**Tharma Sarvendra**

**Mapping Tamil Transnational Politics: Past, Present and Future**

## 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.*

## The Author

Tharma Sarvendra is a PhD fellow in Human Geography at University of Oslo in Norway. He has a background in business studies, science, society and technology studies (ESST) and development studies. His current PhD project is about homeland orientation and transnational life of two war-torn diaspora communities Tamils and Somalis in Norway with a special focus on impacts of remittance and homeland-based cultural practices on their life in Norway.

## Tharma Sarvendra

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts to map Tamil Transnational politics of the past, present and the future by outlining some key developments in Tamil transnational political activism since the struggle for the independent state of Tamil Eelam began. The military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 resulted in several drastic changes in Tamil politics in Sri Lanka and the diaspora, one important change being the emergence of several factions in the Tamil polity in the Tamil homeland and in the Tamil Diaspora.

Some of the key questions this paper attempts to address include: Is there a political divide between the diaspora and those in the “homeland”? What are the dynamics that animate Tamil transnational politics in the post May 2009 era? What are the main differences between Tamil transnational politics in the pre- and post- May 2009 era? What could be the future trends in Tamil Transnational politics?

After providing a brief overview on theoretical perspectives of transnational practices and transnational political activism, this paper discusses Tamil transnational political activism from a perspective that questions the validity of the concept of long distance nationalism. The paper argues that Tamil political activism pre-May 2009 could be seen as transnational if the LTTE is viewed as a transnational political formation. Post-May 2009, the transnationalism of Tamil political activism is more obvious, and the paper focuses on political formations such as the TGTE, GTF and National Country Councils, and discusses the tensions around these political formations. The paper concludes by discussing three possible scenarios of Tamil transnational political activism in the future.

**Keywords:** Tamil Transnational politics, LTTE, TGTE, GTF, National Country Councils, TNA

# 1. Introduction

This paper attempts to map Tamil transnational political activism of the past, present and future from a Tamil perspective, by outlining some key developments in the field since the struggle for an independent state of Tamil Eelam began.

The first attempt to declare the independence of Tamil Eelam was on Thaipongal day in January 1982. Eelam Tamil activists in the US state of Massachusetts planned to unilaterally declare independence for Tamil Eelam and form a government in exile. This was subsequent to the declaration in the Massachusetts State Assembly on 10 May 1979 that a national day for Tamils, called 'Tamil Eelam Day', would be commemorated on 22 May 1979<sup>1</sup>. The then president of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), Mr. M Sivasithamparam, participated in the Massachusetts State Assembly meeting.

In May 1976 the TULF adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of an independent and sovereign State of Tamil Eelam as the solution to the Tamil national question. Popularly known as the 'Vadukoddai Resolution', the TULF was victorious in the 1977 general elections of 1977 on a platform endorsing the resolution, and the idea of an independent state for Tamils gained popular mandate in the Tamil political space. After winning in 1977, the TULF announced that it would call for a constituent assembly with the elected members of the parliament to draft a constitution for the independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam, but such a constituent assembly was never called. The TULF, the political formation that lit the fire of Tamil Eelam in the popular Tamil imagination, failed in mobilizing the public, and especially the younger generation as it failed to develop a political programme for achieving Tamil Eelam. The 1980s marked a major shift in the leadership of Eelam Tamil politics as a result of this.

What followed is a story of how a non-violent political advocacy for Tamil rights in Sri Lanka was turned in to an armed resistance. When the initiative for forming a government in exile in early 1980 was mooted, the diaspora activists behind the initiative were not in agreement with the TULF leadership. Nor was the leadership of TULF was interested in forming a government in exile. The initiators of the move visited Tamil Nadu and had conversations with Tamil militant liberation movements soliciting support for the proposed government in exile. They were able to get support from sections of the Tamil militant organisations, but this support was not unanimous. The main opponent of the move was Mr. Velupillai Pirabakaran, the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Mr. Pirabakaran was of the view that the struggle for the independent state of Tamil Eelam should be grounded in the traditional Tamil homelands in the North and East provinces of Sri Lanka. Despite the opposition from the LTTE, initiators of the government in exile continued their mission, resulting in the LTTE at one stage making a public statement condemning the move, titled "Nadu kadathappaddanilaiyil Thamil Eelam" (Tamil Eelam in a state of being exiled). The LTTE's position on the government in exile, and the events that followed in the North and East of Sri Lanka, forced the initiators of the government in exile to drop the project.

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<sup>1</sup> It was on 22 May 1972 that the island of Ceylon adopted a new Republican constitution, became a republic and changed its name to Sri Lanka.

Almost 30 years later, in June 2009, the head of the LTTE's Department of International Relations, Mr. Selvarasa Pathmanathan (popularly known as KP), announced the formation of a Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE). This was to be an independent political formation of the Eelam Tamil diaspora, formed through democratic means and by popular voting. The announcement itself was a result of the changes that had happened on the ground<sup>2</sup>. Mr. Visvanathan Rudrakumaran, a former legal advisor to the LTTE's International Secretariat, took the responsibility of leading the formation committee for the creation of the TGTE. The TGTE itself has been described as a novel concept, with no precedence, and spelling out a distinction between a government in exile and a transnational government (TGTE 2009).<sup>3</sup> Although the concept and modalities of transnational government and a government in exile differ, the move to form a transnational government itself suggests that the struggle to form an independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam is anchored within the Tamil diaspora. 'Transnational' has become a household word in the Tamil Diaspora since the political program of the TGTE was launched.

In May 2009, the LTTE was militarily defeated and the Tamil territory controlled by the LTTE was brought under the control of the Sri Lankan armed forces. This had a tremendous impact on the Eelam Tamil politics, and especially the Eelam Tamil diaspora. The previous thirty years of the struggle for an independent Tamil state had resulted in the continuous displacement and migration of Eelam Tamils to various parts of the world - mainly to Western countries - and created a million-strong, politically motivated, Tamil diaspora. In the post-May 2009 scenario, the Tamil politics in the homeland and in the diaspora work with different political agendas that indicate a greater diversity in the Eelam Tamil national politics than has ever been seen before.<sup>4</sup>

The military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 resulted in several drastic changes taking place in Tamil politics in Sri Lanka and the diaspora. One important change has been the emergence of various factions among the Tamil polity - both in the Tamil homeland and in the Tamil Diaspora. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has taken a lead role in Tamil homeland and the TGTE and the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) have emerged as key players in the diaspora, as will be discussed later in this paper.

The Government of Sri Lanka, human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group, and a few Tamil activist groups such as the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum, all maintain that there is a clear division between Tamil politics in the Tamil homeland and in the diaspora. They argue that while the politics and interests of Tamils in Sri Lanka have moved away from a separate state and the LTTE, the Tamil diaspora, in an adamant and nostalgic way, clings on to the idea of an independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam as the political solution to the Tamil national question.

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<sup>2</sup> See later in this chapter for the changes on the ground.

<sup>3</sup> A major difference between an exile government and a transnational government has been pointed out to be that the former was formed by exiles who claimed that they were the legitimate rulers of the country but left the country due to alien occupation or coup, whereas a transnational government was a governance mechanism of diaspora and transnational communities that evolved from below and challenged the existing global order dominated by states.

<sup>4</sup> This paper considers that Eelam Tamils are a nation that lives in a single space, but at different sites - this is discussed later. The ground reality and the political space hugely differ between at homeland site and the diaspora sites and thus contribute to different political agendas.

Is there a political divide between the diaspora and the “homeland”? What are the dynamics that animate Tamil transnational politics in the post May 2009 era? What are the main differences between Tamil transnational politics in the pre- and post-May 2009 era? What would be the future trends in Tamil Transnational politics? These are the key questions that this paper explores.

The paper is organized into four sections: The first section provides a brief theoretical overview of transnationalism and transnational practices, while also briefly looking at the theoretical issues related to the concepts of long distance nationalism and political transnationalism. This theoretical section argues that in the era of transnationalization, earlier approaches such as long distance nationalism had become outdated. It does so by critically assessing some of the fundamental assumptions of long distance nationalism such as the politics of irresponsibility. Sections two and three are more empirical, based on data collected through interviews, informal conversations, analysis of documents and media releases and observations. Section two takes a historical look at Tamil political activism and attempts to understand the dynamics in the Tamil transnational politics in the pre-May 2009 period. Though there had been several organisations with transnational connections, this section focuses on the evolution of LTTE as a transnational political organisation. The LTTE was chosen for this purpose because it has been the single most powerful organisation dominating Eelam Tamil politics in the homeland and in the diaspora since mid 1980s. The LTTE’s transnational activities are a vast area for a study, but this paper adopts a strategy of understanding the evolutionary process of the organisation by studying the leaders who were involved in its transnational formation. In addition, the section also maps some of the important characteristics of the transnational politics practiced by the LTTE. The third section focuses on the post-May 2009 era of Tamil diaspora politics and the formation of transnational political institutions. It studies some of the contentious discourses surrounding these institutions, particularly the TGTE, GTF and Nationals Country Councils (NCCs), as these are the important organisations that were formed in the post May 2009 period. The fourth and final section discusses some possible future scenarios in Tamil transnational politics.

In mapping Tamil Transnational politics, this paper does not deal with the political activism of those who belong outside the LTTE supportive, pro-struggle diaspora network. As explained above, an increasing diversity is visible among the diaspora who supported the struggle and who participated in the last phase of protest actions during January – May 2009 under the leadership of the LTTE supportive diaspora network. Even post-May 2009, the participants of the political transnational activism in the TGTE, GTF, or in the country councils, have all been part of the pro-struggle section of the diaspora community. Apart from this community, there are few groups that were against the LTTE and supportive of independent state of Tamil Eelam, which are functioning, but their impact on the Tamil transnational politics is minimal and this paper does not discuss them.

## 2. Theorising Transnationalism/Transnational Practices

To understand Tamil transnational politics, it is important to understand the re-emergence of transnationalism as an analytical tool since the early 1990s. In that period, more attention has been given to studying transmigrants and their political, economic, social and cultural engagements with their countries of origin or 'homelands' and other areas where community members remain dispersed.

One of the earliest definitions of transnationalism refers to it as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al. 1994, 7). This suggests that a continuous relationship between the country of origin and the country of settlement builds the foundation for transnationalism. Guarnizo adopts the definition of Basch et al., and expands the spheres of connections to the "web of cultural, social, economic, and political relationships, practices, and identities built by migrants across national borders" (1997, 287). Portes et al. (1999) interpret transnationalism as economic, political and socio-cultural occupations and activities that require regular long-term contacts across borders for their success. Vertovec (1999; 2004; 2009) suggests that transnationalism has multiple ties and interactions linking people or interactions across the borders of nation-states. He also identifies different points of departure on transnationalism such as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement and (re)construction of place or locality.

Attempts have been made to conceptually clarify the term transnational, using both theoretical and empirical arguments. In a situation where transnational and international have been used interchangeably, a distinction between the two terms becomes absolutely essential. Thus 'international' is considered to denote the phenomena of state affairs (i.e. relationship between states beyond the state boundaries) while 'transnational' is considered to refer to affairs of non-state actors that transcend territorial boundaries of nation states when the entities operate and form the relationship (Portes 2001; Kjeldstadli 2008; Vertovec 2009). In light of this clarification of terms, this article takes the position that all the Tamil diaspora political activism is transnational politics, rather than international politics.

To look at transnational practices in a theoretical context, it is important to see the different positions adopted by scholars towards such practices. These were often presented as typologies. Smith and Guarnizo (1998) outlined a typology of transnationalism which contained transnationalism from *above* and from *below*. According to these authors, transnationalism from above means the activities of multinationals, including transnational capital, global media, and so on; while that from below denotes the activities of individuals and groups who operate within the transnational social space. In this sense, the Tamil transnational politics that this article discusses can be described as transnationalism from below.

Itzigsohn et al. (1999) frame their findings as *narrow and broad* transnationalism, relating the former to continuous and institutionalised relations and connections and the latter to occasional relations. Tamil transnational politics have always taken institutional form

(both pre- and post-May 2009 as discussed later) and in this sense can be described as narrow transnationalism. However, it is also important to note that all diaspora members have not continually and institutionally participated in Tamil transnational politics, with a section of people participating occasionally. Many Tamils who had not participated in political activities before January 2009 did participate in the diaspora political activism during the period between January and May 2009. Thus, given that participation can be described as a part of broad transnationalism, Tamil political activism can be described as both narrow and broad.

Another typology sees transnationalism with *core* and *expanded* activities in the transnational social field (Guarnizo 2000; Levitt 2001a; 2001b). Core transnationalism for Guarnizo (2000) included activities that are part of individual habitus, undertaken on a regular basis and predictable from the pattern they adopt. Expanded transnationalism refers to the activities that take place occasionally, for example, activities undertaken due to political crises or natural disasters in the homeland. In this sense, Tamil transnational political practices largely fall under the category of expanded transnationalism as suggested by Guarnizo. Levitt, by adopting the outline provided by Guarnizo on core and expanded transnationalism, suggested examples of comprehensive and selective activities for both. Portes (2003) positions transnationalism as *broad* and *strict*, where broad transnationalism means regular and occasional transnational engagements and strict transnationalism includes only regular engagements. In this context, Tamil political transnationalism can be described as broad transnationalism.

These typologies all take the form of dichotomies, largely related to two phenomena: *actors* who participate in transnational engagements (above and below and great and little) and the *intensity* (narrow and broad, core and expanded, broad and strict) of transnational activities. In that context, this paper looks on Tamil diaspora political activism as including all kind of politically motivated actions. These actions fall into two categories: one has its foundation in the politics of homeland or country of origin, while the other anchors specifically in the politics of the country of settlement. On many occasions, the main motivation for participating in the politics of the country of settlement arises from the need or willingness to mobilise the political forces of the country of settlement in regards to the country of origin. Thus it would be difficult to distinguish these two modes of political engagement, and this paper does not attempt to do so.

Considering the phenomena discussed above, this article considers (Tamil) political transnationalism as the politically motivated actions, relations and practices that transcend the territorial borders of the country of settlement and connect the country of origin and other diaspora spaces for the purpose of influencing the politics of the country of origin. In the context of this paper, Tamil transnational politics can be defined as the politically motivated actions, relations and practices that focus on the politics of self determination of Eelam Tamils and links the Eelam Tamil traditional homeland and other sites where Tamil diaspora members are dispersed.

### **Long distance nationalism or transnational political activism?**

The political involvement of the dispersed people in their 'homeland' affairs has been described as long distance nationalism (Andersen 1992; 1998; Fuglerud 1998). Andersen characterized long distance nationalism with a negative connotation of political participation

without responsibility. Citing a story of the involvement of Punjabi businessman in Canada in politics of his homeland, he criticized such involvement, commenting on those involved who contribute and participate in a political space without undergoing the suffering of the people on the ground, while at the same time safeguarding the material and other interests of their family in the countries in which they have settled (Andersen 1992). He describes this kind of participation as ‘an act without responsibility’.

The role of diasporas in peace and conflict has also gained notice among policy makers and academics. A widely cited World Bank study argues that there is a connection between conflicts in the home country and the strength and participation of the diaspora in the homeland conflicts (Collier 2000). Research has been conducted on whether diasporas are peace makers or war mongers (Smith/Stares 2007). The involvement of diasporas with state, whether political relationships or others, have also been discussed. One perspective argues that state-linked diasporas have been engaged in more benign activities than the stateless diaspora (Sheffer 2003). In this context, the Tamil diaspora, being a stateless diaspora (in that the section studied does not consider itself linked to the Sri Lankan state) has become a concern for the researchers and policy makers. In a scenario where diasporas who were described as victims earlier have now been transformed as challengers of states (Cohen 1996), the Tamil diaspora has been cited as an exemplary community in this sense.

This paper questions the theoretical validity of the concept of long distance nationalism by taking a transnational perspective. One of the key perspectives of transnationalism sees transnational communities as entities living in a single space or field that transcends national borders (Faist 1998; 2000a; 2000b; Levitt/Glick Schiller 2004). According to this perspective, transnational actors engage in the societal activities in political, economic, social, cultural and religious spheres in that space or in the field. In the case of the term long distance nationalism, the framing of ‘long-distance’ takes into account only the physical distance between the country of origin and the places where the diasporas live. This ‘physical distance’ approach is in contradiction with the ‘space’, approach where space is not bound by physical closeness, but with all kind of relations and affiliations that take place within the space. Among transnational communities and diasporas, especially for the communities from war-torn areas, involvement in the affairs of their countries of origin or ‘homelands’ have been crucial, even when they live in different sites. Through this participation, they have become members of a society that transcends the territorial borders of the nation states. In this sense transnational communities challenge the traditional sociological notion of society that was built upon methodological nationalism, seeing society as a group of people within the borders of the national states that form a society (Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2003). Adopting a transnational perspective to see the world, one can easily identify those transnational communities as a part of global society that exists in a single space at different sites. In a world of globalization, time-space compression (Harvey 1990) makes the distance comparatively less important than in earlier period. Furthermore, many countries (including the UK) have adopted double citizenship arrangements and many members of transnational communities have now become dual citizens, thus gaining the rights to participate in all social spheres including deciding the politics of the country of origin and country of settlement through their voting rights. Many live in both countries throughout the year, some months in one home and rest in the other. In such a complex

scenario, this paper argues that it is no longer appropriate to describe the political activism of members of transnational communities (including diasporas) in the political affairs of the countries of origin as long distance nationalism.

Another important argument of Benedict Anderson focuses on 'irresponsible activities' of the transnational communities and diasporas, who are involved in activities outside the country of origin and thus are not the subjects of the consequences of their activities. This approach has gained currency in the literature on political transnationalism. This article argues that this view narrows the scope of political transnationalism within a sphere of consequence of political actions. Research has shown that the transnational political activism and involvement of transnational communities and diasporas have also led to positive political contribution in the countries of origin (Cheran 2003; Orjuela 2008; Horst 2008; Horst/Gaas 2008). Even in the cases of armed conflicts, transnational political activism has contributed in negotiated political settlements and conflict resolution. In a situation where states, with the support of other members of their 'states' club', have adopted oppressive means against their people, the political activism of the transnational communities and diaspora has challenged state domination and strengthened the agency of the people who have fought for their rights. In a scenario where long distance nationalism has been framed with negative connotations, it does not contribute to impartially assessing all the dimensions of the political activities of transnational communities and diasporas. Thus this article prefers to adopt the transnational political activism optic than the long-distance nationalism framework.

Furthermore, the claim of 'safe participation' in the politics of the countries of origin while living in a country of settlement, as in the case of the Punjabi businessman cited by Andersen, has become questionable in an era of fight against the 'global terrorism'. Many countries have designated organisations that wage armed struggle against the states as 'terrorist organisations'. Those who support such organisations take the risk of being penalised or criminalised. For example, in 1997 the United States designated the LTTE as a terrorist organisation (the first time a Western country had done so) and many other countries followed suit with UK in 2001, EU in 2005 and Canada in 2007. Tamil diaspora members who participated in transnational political activism thorough the LTTE faced the risk (or consequence) of the political decisions they made. Though the risk of participation has increased since the 'terrorist' designation, there were arrests and court cases against those who engaged in transnational political participation even before these designations. During the period of LTTE headed transnational political activism, there have been police and legal actions against the activists in Germany, Canada, Australia, Denmark, US, France, the Netherlands, UK, and Switzerland. Though these arrests were made under the laws of these countries in connection with the unlawful activities of the activists, the political motive behind these legal actions – of suppressing the activism – has been also noticed by those targeted. The actions taken by the Canadian government to deport diaspora political activist Suresh Manicavaskam in 1995, by declaring him to be a person belonging to an inadmissible class in Canada, is a clear example of this highly politically motivated legal action. In this context, this article also sees that diaspora political activism has had its consequences for activists in the countries of settlement where they have involved in such activism and argues that the notion of 'safe participation' is highly questionable.

In studying Tamil diaspora's transnational political activism, there are two important phases to be taken into consideration. This paper focuses on the evolution and operation of the LTTE as a transnational political organisation, with the participation and the support of Tamil diaspora. This marks the first phase of the transnational political activism of Tamil diaspora. The second phase of Tamil diaspora political activism takes its departure since May 2009, when the LTTE was militarily defeated and its domination over Tamil politics in the ground had been erased. There are some fundamental differences between these two phases, which this paper will discuss later. Either phase of Tamil diaspora activism cannot be simply characterized as irresponsible politics of long distance nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Emergence of the LTTE as a Transnational Political Organisation**

This section looks at the emergence of LTTE as a transnational political movement. In the development of the LTTE as a leading organisation of Eelam Tamil transnational politics, working towards an independent and sovereign State of Tamil Eelam based on the right to self determination, the United Kingdom was a main hub for Tamil transnational political activism. There were two main reasons for the key role the United Kingdom, especially the city of London, played in this development.

The first was the historical political connection between the United Kingdom and Sri Lanka as the colonial master and the subject respectively. After the independence of Ceylon (as it was then known), the British were seen by the Tamils as a guarantor of their rights under Sinhala majority rule. Many Tamils consider that the decision to transfer political power on the island into the hands of the Sinhala majority as being the main cause of Sinhala domination over the Tamil people in the island and the key contributing factor towards the national ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. In this sense, the Tamils felt that the British had a moral responsibility for the sufferings of the Tamil people at the hands of successive Sinhala dominated regimes that ruled the island since independence. These historical connections laid a strong foundation for political engagement on issues related to Sri Lanka.

The second reason is related to Tamil migration history. Tamils have migrated to the UK as labour migrants, students and political refugees since independence and formed a strong Tamil community there much earlier than in other Western countries where the Tamil diaspora is currently located. Tamil migration to the UK has also had connections with the events in the island – some important push factors include the 1956 'Sinhala Only' Act that compelled Tamils to learn Sinhala to secure their status in government positions, the introduction of different criteria for university admission for Sinhala and Tamil students known as 'standardisation', and the 1983 pogrom against the Tamils supported by the Sinhala dominated state institutions. The early formation of a Tamil community in the UK has facilitated the Tamil diaspora's political activism in the UK in the early stages of the evolution

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent study that questions the claim of irresponsible political actions of diaspora and transnational communities with respect of Tamil diaspora political activism, see Vimalarajah and Cheran (2010).

of Tamil transnational politics. One of the related features in this political activism has also been fuelled by the fact that many of the Tamils who migrated to the UK in the early stages were educated and in one way or another affected by the Sinhala domination in the island. This affected, educated community of people, and the consciousness of victimhood in their collective memory, resulted in their involvement in Tamil transnational politics.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the widely held belief that the LTTE initiated, planned and organized its transnational network since 1970s, information collected from political activists involved in Tamil transnational politics at the time reveals that the diaspora members themselves took the first initiatives to work with the liberation movements. In many countries, Tamil diaspora political activism linked to militant politics started after 1983, though in many places, the 1976 Vadukoddai Resolution and the 1977 elections were the spur. The UK has been a site of diaspora transnational political engagement, with a support network for Tamil militant organisations, since before 1983.

After 1977, the moderate politics of TULF did not match the expectation of the politically motivated young generation. This led to conflict between TULF and youth political activists. The emergence of small groups of Tamil militant organisations in Eelam Tamil politics had been accelerated beyond their organic growth due to the Sri Lankan government's militaristic approach and the support given by the Indian government to armed liberation movements immediately after the ethnic pogrom in July in 1983 in Colombo and other Southern parts of the island. The ethnic conflict became a tool for regional geopolitical manipulation for regional and global actors, dominated by Indian involvement.

Since 1977, Tamil Eelam activists have been engaged in political activism in Western countries to mobilise support for the armed struggle for establishing the independent state of Tamil Eelam. In the early phases, the support bases were largely anchored in organisations with two different schools of thoughts. One was the support network related to the LTTE, at that time a small militant organisation with less than 30 members. The LTTE believed in guerrilla tactics as the strategy for moving forward the struggle for an independent state.<sup>7</sup> The second was the support network of Marxist oriented liberation movements such as Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS)<sup>8</sup> and Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). The roots of EPRLF and EROS were laid in the UK, with a theoretician named Ratnasabapathy being the philosophical guide for these organisations. Due to conflicts within the LTTE, another organisation called Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) was formed in 1981 and it was also able to keep its contact network among the Tamil diaspora. The other leading militant organisation of that time, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), also had a contact network in the UK and other Western countries.

Since this article focuses on evolution of LTTE as a transnational political movement, it restricts its scope to the important development in the LTTE's transnational engagements. One of the early and key contributions of UK Tamil diaspora in the evolution of LTTE as a

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to stress that the UK is not the only place where early Tamil transnational political activism surfaced (meaning activities and engagements that took place before 1983). As mentioned in the Introduction, there were some initiatives from the US. France was another country where Tamils formed an organisation called the Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC) in the late 1970s to support all the liberation movements who had engaged in armed struggle to form an independent sovereign state of Tamil Eelam. Later, when the Tamil armed liberation movements engaged in internal conflicts, TCC France took a position to support the LTTE.

<sup>7</sup> In the early phases of LTTE, there were internal tensions related to ideology differences and organisational issues. One of the early members of LTTE called Ayer wrote a section of the history involving his personal experiences in a Tamil website [www.inioru.com](http://www.inioru.com). This paper does not go into the details of these internal conflicts and tensions of the militant organisations.

<sup>8</sup> EROS dropped the phrase 'Students' later when it transformed itself a broader national organisation.

transnational movement can be identified with the year 1978. That was when the British LTTE contact persons, Krishnan and Ramachandran, met Anton Balasingham and his wife Adele Balasingham in their residence in London and, on behalf of LTTE leader Velupillai Pirabakaran, invited them to work with the organisation. Subsequent meetings ended in the involvement of the Balasinghams in the LTTE (especially after meeting Pirabakaran in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in 1979).<sup>9</sup> Anton and Adele Balasingham decided to work with the LTTE and Anton Balasingham emerged as the ideologue of the organisation, becoming a very influential person on the LTTE, especially in formulating strategies for peace negotiations.<sup>10</sup> The role of Balasingham in the LTTE was well described by one of the senior leaders of the LTTE, Yogi, in a condolence message when Balasingham died of cancer in December 2006. Yogi used a family metaphor with Pirabakaran as the father of the LTTE and Balasingham as the mother. Yogi proclaimed that children have a reluctance to express all grievances to the father, but they would do it comparatively easily to their mother and in this sense Balasingham played a mother role in the LTTE. “We children of the LTTE family have approached Bala Anna with all grievances and he listened to all our feelings and brought them to the attention of thalaivar (Pirabakaran) at an appropriate time”, Yogi proclaimed in an audio recorded message.<sup>11</sup>

Though Balasingham had become the LTTE’s ideologue and chief negotiator and supported the organisation’s transnational political engagements in many ways, shaping the LTTE as a transnational organisation was not undertaken by him. In the early stages, the political office in Chennai in Tamil Nadu coordinated the initiatives of the Tamil diaspora across its different locations. Local persons were given the mandate to work for the LTTE in their respective countries, with Chennai as the coordinating hub for all the activities, both in the traditional Tamil homeland and other overseas locations. Tamil homeland had been divided into five administrative districts - Jaffna, Vanni, Mannar, Batticaloa-Amparai and Trincomalee - each under an overall military commander. On the ground there were clear codes of conduct between LTTE cadres and supporters.

Supporting activities overseas were largely carried out by the supporters. There were almost no LTTE cadres involved in the creation of early support networks in Western countries. The LTTE decided to send a cadre called KP to organise the LTTE supporting networks in Western countries and mobilise fundraising in the mid 1980s. KP travelled to many countries where Tamil diaspora lived and was engaged with organising and fund raising activities through the supporting networks in those various countries. At the time, the LTTE supporting engagements were loosely organized, functioning under different names in different countries. It would be useful to site some examples in order to set out the diversity in the organising efforts. In the mid eighties, two organisations - Thamilar Munnetra Sangam (TMS) - and the SOLT- Student Organisation of London Tamils (or Liberation Tigers) - were representing the LTTE supporting activities in the UK, despite some organisational tensions among them. Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC) was the supporting network in France. In

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<sup>9</sup> For the detail story of Balasingham’s involvement in LTTE, see, *The Will to freedom* (Balasingham 2003).

<sup>10</sup> In LTTE, leader Pirabakaran has had ultimate power in the decision making and there are occasions where Pirabakaran ruled out the suggestions of Balasingham. During the peace negotiations that held between 2002-2006, Balasingham was able to convince Pirabakaran in the early stages of the negotiations and it had become difficult in the later stages for Balasingham, informed sources revealed to this author.

<sup>11</sup> The recorded message appeared in the “Tamilnatham” website in December 2006 and the author of the paper listened to the message at that time. Since the website was closed in October 2009, it is now difficult to get access to the message.

Norway two organisations, Thamilar Nalanpuri Manram and Uthayam were working for LTTE in different regions. LTTE supporting activities in Denmark were initially organised by a group of people from Norway. There were minimal levels of contact across the organisations in different countries. Co-ordination was made through the office in India and by the KP cadre sent for the purpose. Gradually, KP became the coordinating person for LTTE transnational activities.

In December 1986, LTTE leader Pirabaharan decided to leave Tamil Nadu for the Eelam Tamil homeland in order to avoid Indian pressure for a minimalistic political solution. Since Pirabaharan moved to the homeland, the importance of Tamil Nadu as the coordinating hub slowly lost its importance, but LTTE maintained its political office there with some cadres. The Indo-Lanka accord of July 1987 and the consequent fighting between LTTE and Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in October 1987 made it more difficult for LTTE to rely on Tamil Nadu as a back base for logistics and other supporting mechanisms. The LTTE decided to give more focus to its overseas network and the foundation for the LTTE as a transnational organisation was laid.

For the second phase of transnational organisation of the LTTE, the UK once again became a key hub. An LTTE senior leader (and former Jaffna commander) Sathasivam Krishnakumar, popularly known as Kiddu<sup>12</sup>, arrived in the UK in 1989 for medical treatment and with a political programme of organising the LTTE transnationally. At the time, the LTTE was holding peace talks with the then Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, and these talks facilitated Kiddu's arrival in London. While undergoing treatment, Kiddu took responsibility for the LTTE's transnational network – a work division was made between Kiddu and KP, with Kiddu responsible for all the activities of LTTE branches and supporting networks while KP took over responsibility for the LTTE's logistics. Kiddu was in London until the middle of 1991 and subsequently in Switzerland for 9 months until February 1992 and some unrevealed locations thereafter, until he took his own life in January 1993.

Kiddu's main task during his stay in Europe was to structurally organise LTTE as a transnational political organisation. Internal tensions within the various support network organisations were addressed and reorganisations made. For example, in the UK, internal tensions between the activists were dealt with and the LTTE supporting activities were handled by an organisation called United Tamil Organisation (UTO). An International Secretariat was also set up in London and the contacts of LTTE were maintained through that body. Activities of the transnational LTTE support network included fundraising and political lobbying, and the engagements were coordinated through the International Secretariat. Kiddu was also engaged in informal dialogues with Sri Lankan ministers when they visited London.<sup>13</sup> Kiddu was assisted by Mr. Thilakar, a Paris based LTTE leader, in organising the transnational activities of the LTTE. Thilakar had been a member of the LTTE peace delegation to the Thimbu Talks in 1985 and in the talks with President Premadasa in 1989. After Kiddu's demise, Thilakar took over the responsibility for LTTE's transnational activities and KP continued to be responsible for logistics of the LTTE. During Thilakar's period, Paris became

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<sup>12</sup> The LTTE awarded him a Colonel position after he died by committing suicide with 9 other cadres in the Indian Ocean when the Indian Navy was trying to capture the vessel that he and the other cadres were travelling in on 16 January 1993.

<sup>13</sup> One of the key people who engaged in dialogue with Kiddu during his stay in London was the former senior minister in a number of UNP governments, Mr. A C S Hameed.

the main hub for coordination of LTTE's transnational activities. In the latter part of 1996, Thilakar left Paris and moved to the LTTE headquarters in Vanni, and Mr. Velumyulum Manokaran, then leader of the LTTE supporting network in Paris, was appointed as the responsible person for the International Secretariat. Paris had continuously played an important role as a location in organizing and coordinating the LTTE's supporting transnational activities. During the period of Manokaran's leadership, KP was considered the person with overall authority in the transnational affairs of the LTTE.

During the ceasefire and peace negotiations of 2002-2006, the LTTE started a process of reorganizing its transnational coordinating structure. In 2003, Mr. Veerakathy Mannivannan, popularly known as Castro, who was the leader of 'Anaithulaka Thodarpakam' (International contact centre)<sup>14</sup> took over control of the LTTE's transnational activities. KP was released from his logistics responsibility and from then on (until May 2009); all the LTTE's support activities were coordinated from the Vanni (in Northern Sri Lanka).

The following observations are made on the transnational activities and practices of the LTTE. Tamil diaspora members played a crucial role in the establishment of the transnational supporting activities of the LTTE in the countries where they had settled. These diaspora members did not consider themselves LTTE cadres, but as supporters of the Tamil liberation struggle and the LTTE. There were clear distinctions between LTTE members and those working with the transnational network as supporters and sympathizers.<sup>15</sup>

The characteristics of LTTE transnational supporting network can be divided into two different modes; the pre-2003 period with a mode of operation with a loose connection to the LTTE headquarters and the post-2003 period when the organisation and coordination of the activities were carried out from Vanni under the leadership of Castro as a mode of 'tight or close-knit connection', where every activity was coordinated, monitored and controlled by the leadership in Vanni.

The members of the Tamil diaspora that had worked with LTTE supporting transnational networks during the period of 'loose connection' had more agency in the decision making and everyday organisational activities. The leaders of country organisations were from the Tamil diaspora and were not persons who moved to Western countries specifically for mobilising the support for the struggle. They were all largely refugees who fled the war. The contact with the ground was weak and loose during this period. Even the leaders of the LTTE's transnational network had very limited contacts with the LTTE headquarters.

During the period of 'loose connection', many activities were initiated and implemented depending on the situation and context in the diaspora space. Many community welfare activities were initiated on their own without instructions from the LTTE leadership on the ground. Tamils schools that were formed by LTTE supporting communities in many countries are a good example. At the organisational level of the LTTE too, some decisions were made in line with the realities in the diaspora space – one crucial example of this is the

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<sup>14</sup> The international contact office was in operation since early 1990 and functioned as supporting organ for the international secretariat formed by Kiddu. When LTTE employed the term "international" the distinction between 'international' and 'transnational' was not made. The term international was used to mean the activities and relations beyond the Eelam Tamil homeland.

<sup>15</sup> There has been a misconception in many quarters that those who worked with the transnational supporting network of LTTE were all LTTE members or cadres. LTTE adopted a practice of administering an oath of loyalty to the leader, to the cause and to the organisation when a person becomes member of the organisation. Almost all the activists that worked with the LTTE transnational network whether they worked full time or part time were not recruited as members and did not take the oath in the pre-2003 period.

decision made by the representatives of LTTE transnational supporting networks (under the leadership of Thilakar) in 1994 to keep the commemoration of the Black Tigers<sup>16</sup> as a low key event in Western countries. The decision was made on the rationale that avoiding drawing negative attention to the LTTE supporting transnational activities was important to the continuing work of these organisations.

During almost three decades of Tamil diaspora transnational political activism, a strong community of *Gesellschaft*, as described by Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 (Harris 2001), was created among diaspora supporters of the LTTE and the Tamil Eelam cause. This community includes organisations and networks with local and transnational identities. In one sense, these two identities can be described as two sides of the same coin. Many of the organisations were local in a sense that they functioned under the law of the countries where they were formed and also represented the interests of the local people. They were transnational in that they supported the struggle under the leadership of LTTE and kept contacts beyond their respective national borders with the Eelam Tamil homeland and other sites where such communities were simultaneously formed.

Technological advancements, especially in communication and travel, have had impacts on the mode of LTTE transnational organisation. Lack of travel and communication facilities were key factors that contributed to loose connection in the pre 2003 period. There were periods when the LTTE had only letter correspondence between the headquarters and the International Secretariat. But in the post 2003 period, due to the ceasefire, greater diaspora physical circulation was possible and communication facilities with satellite connections were available. This was well evident through the ability of the LTTE to maintain their overseas communication right until 17 May 2009 from the last battle front at Mullivaikal.

There were changes in global structures that affected opportunities for an organisation like the LTTE in the post cold war period. During the cold war period, resistance and liberation movements had options to exploit the support of opposing camps of the cold war. In the post cold war period, attempts to create a uni-polar, pro-West world led by the USA were dominant and the appetite for armed struggles diminished. The attacks on USA on 11 September 2001 made the survival of armed resistance movements even more difficult. The LTTE had to face this global turbulence and managed to survive successfully in the pre 2003 period. In the post 2003 period, ceasefire and the peace talks with the Sri Lankan government, with the facilitation of the Norwegian Government, provided some opportunities in global arena. The resumption of war in 2006 had a negative impact on these opportunity structures.

During the last phase of the war, especially during the months of January to May 2009, there was increasing unity among the Tamil people, who were mobilised in unprecedented numbers in various parts of the world. The huge participation of Tamils (including those of the second generation) in the demonstrations was largely the result of the organisational capacity of the pro-struggle, LTTE supporting community. Many Tamils who had basic disagreement with LTTE politics also felt that the defeat of LTTE would result in the defeat of the Tamil people in the island and joined hands with this LTTE supportive community.

There has been an increased visibility of diversity and differences of opinion and actions among the Tamil Eelam and LTTE supportive community networks since May 2009.

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<sup>16</sup> LTTE declared July 5th as Black Tiger day to give respect to the suicide carders who sacrificed their life for the cause. The day was selected on the ground that the first suicide cadre called Miller gave his life on July 5th 1987 when he was driven the explosive driven vehicle to the military premises located in Nelliayadi in the Vadamarcchi division of the Jaffna Peninsula.

This reflects in the formation of post May 2009 structures for transnational political activism, and these dynamics are dealt with in the next section.

## **4. Tamil Transnational Political Activism in the Post May 2009 Period**

The transnational existence of Eelam Tamil nation has evolved as a phenomenon of single entity beyond territorial boundaries of nation states. As this paper adopts a transnational perspective of single space and challenges the notion of long distance nationalism, it sees that the Eelam Tamil nation lives in a single space, but at different sites, maintaining multi-stranded relationships in political, economic, social and cultural arenas. Due to differences in ground reality and political space, the Tamils who live outside the island of Sri Lanka have more freedom to express and exercise their political positions and actions in the post May 2009 period. As a result, at present a cleavage is emerging between the political situation of those in the Eelam homeland and those in various Tamil diaspora sites.

Though there are differences in the ground reality and the political positions between the sites of Eelam Tamil homeland and the diaspora, it is important to recognize there is also solid ground for commonness and similarities. The key component of this commonness is based on the political position of Tamil identity. Despite the serious efforts of the Sri Lankan state to establish a Sinhala-Buddhist based Sri Lankan identity over the people in the Eelam Tamil homeland, the Tamil people continuously rally around a distinct Tamil identity and the notion of Tamils as a distinct people. In the diaspora, the Eelam Tamil identity has emerged as an important unifying factor amidst the differences among the actors. Though hyphenated identities, such as British-Tamil, Tamil-Canadian, also prevail, they include the Eelam Tamil identity and function as a form of solidarity based on the Tamil nation. The following discussion on post-May 2009 differences and dynamics in this section has to be approached in this context.

In the post-May 2009 period, Eelam Tamil politics has undergone tremendous changes. After the defeat of the LTTE, the political leadership of Tamil people in the traditional homeland shifted from the LTTE to Tamil National Alliance (TNA). The mode of politics also shifted - from armed militant politics to parliamentary election politics. In a way, the situation now can be compared to a pre-1980 political situation, where the TNA has dropped the demand for the state of Tamil Eelam, but claims that Eelam Tamils are a nationality with the right to self determination and a political solution shall be reached in a way that satisfies the political aspirations of the Eelam Tamil people.<sup>17</sup> In the aftermath of May 2009, there was dissent within the TNA on this political position and it resulted in another political formation, called Tamil National People's Front (TNPf) under the leadership of Gajendrakumar Ponnampalam, former TNA MP and the general secretary of Tamil Congress party.<sup>18</sup> The TNPf declared that the TNA did not agree with the policy of 'one country – two

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<sup>17</sup> For an overview of the current political position of TNA, see the election manifesto of TNA for the Parliamentary election 2010.

<sup>18</sup> The All Ceylon Tamil Congress was one of the four founder parties of TNA and it split from the TNA over this political position.

nations', a policy the TNPF felt was uncompromisable. The TNA announced during the parliament election campaign in 2010 that their position was 'one country – two nationalities'. In the midst of tremendous theoretical discussion on the concept of nations, nationality and ethnicity, neither party was able to clearly explain what they meant by nation and nationality and this led to confusion among the people. The results of the April 2010 parliamentary elections showed that voters were not enthusiastic about voting and the differences and the spilt within the TNA were not welcome. The TNPF was unable to get a single seat in the parliamentary election. Thus, through this parliamentary election, the TNA has emerged as the political leaders of the Eelam Tamil people in the Eelam Tamil homeland.

The situation in the diaspora is far different to what surfaced in the Tamil homeland. The support for an independent and sovereign Tamil Eelam remained the main political position of many Tamils and Tamil political activists. In contrast to the political situation of Eelam Tamil homeland, the pro struggle, LTTE supportive community has dominated the political space of the Tamil diaspora. The Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) and National Country Councils in some countries have emerged and become important players in Tamil transnational political activism in the post-May 2009 period. Some remaining LTTE overseas structures play a relatively invisible but influential role in this activism. At present, there are two organisations - LTTE *Anaithulaka Thodarpakam* and the LTTE Headquarters - both of whom claim that they are the authentic representative of the LTTE.<sup>19</sup> There have also been some indications that there are tensions between LTTE *AnaithulakaThodarpakam* and LTTE headquarters, as reflected in the two MaveerarNaal statements released in 2010 – one from the *Anaithulaka Thodarpakam* on 26 November and another from the LTTE headquarters on 27 November. Unlike in the pre-May 2009 period, there have been tensions and conflicts prevailing within these transnational political formations of the Tamil diaspora. To map diaspora Tamil political activism in the post-May 2009 period, it is essential to understand the formation process of these organisations, and this paper begins with the TGTE.

The TGTE was conceptually developed and shaped by some Tamil diaspora activists and academics who gathered in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in early June 2009 under the facilitation of Mr. Selvarasa Pathmanathan. After the military defeat of LTTE in May 2009, there were tensions between *Anaithulaka Thodarpakam* and the Department of International Relations, especially about who would fill the vacuum created by the military defeat. The concept of the TGTE emerged in the midst of these tensions and the concept was first announced by Pathmanathan as an independent democratic political initiative outside of the LTTE. In the first announcement, Pathmanathan revealed the names of some Tamil and non Tamil professionals and activists as Advisory Committee members for the Formation Committee under the coordination of Mr. VisvanathanRudrakumaran. He also indicated that the Formation Committee would be an independent body.<sup>20</sup> The objectives for the TGTE were also made public by the coordinator of the Formation Committee. Within 6 weeks of the first announcement of the formation of the TGTE, Pathmanathan was arrested in Malaysia by Malaysian authorities and taken to Sri Lanka.<sup>21</sup>

19 For these statements of LTTE headquarters, see <http://www.viduthalaipulikal.net/>. It is believed that this LTTE headquarters also operates from outside the Eelam Tamil homeland.

20 The first announcement of the formation of a Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) was made on 15th of June 2009.

21 A section of diaspora questions the validity of the claim of Pathmanathan's arrest, but this paper takes the position that he had been arrested.

In the meantime, an announcement about the formation of Country Councils through democratic means - also as independent political formation outside of LTTE - was made, with the backup of the *AnaithulakaThodarpakam*.<sup>22</sup> Circles connected to *Kaddamaippu* also criticized the TGTE announcement, stating that it had not clearly declared that the objective of the TGTE was to form an independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam in the Tamil homeland. After the arrest of Pathmanathan, tensions between the TGTE Formation Committee and the *Kaddamaippu* emerged.

There were two grounds for these tensions between the TGTE Formation Committee and the *Kaddamaippu*. One was based on two conflicting models suggested for the formation of the TGTE. Rudrakumaran, in consultation with the Advisory Committee created for the task, suggested a model for electing TGTE's representatives for the TGTE Assembly through direct voting. According to this model, those willing to become representatives of TGTE would contest in direct elections and the representatives would be elected on the basis of majority votes of the polled votes. The elected members would then become a Constituent Assembly explicitly to draft the constitution of the TGTE and the government would then be formed based on the constitution drafted by the elected members. This model emphasized that the elected members would have direct accountability to the people who elected them. This model was opposed by the *Kaddamaippu* and a counter model was suggested. This counter model involved three steps: the first was to hold a referendum in Western countries where considerable numbers of diaspora were living, reaffirming the Vadukoddai Resolution. The second step, based on the verdict in the referendum, was to form National Country Councils (NCCs) through popular voting in order to work for the establishment of the independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam. The third step would see representatives of the NCCs constitute the TGTE.

A further aspect of the original model that was contested was related to the constitution of the TGTE. TGTE Formation Committee held the strong view that the constitution should be written by the elected members by forming a Constituent Assembly, but those who proposed the counter model kept arguing that the constitution should be worked out first and that elections should be held on the basis on the pre-written constitution. No agreement was reached on either point of conflict and these differences have formed the first reason for the tensions among the Eelam Tamil diaspora political activists.

The second reason for the tensions was based on the strategy issue. The initial model suggested by the Formation Committee did not explicitly state that the formation of a Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam was aimed at creating the independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam. The approach adopted by the Formation Committee was to first gain recognition for the Eelam Tamil Nation and its right to self determination, and then, based on that recognition, conduct a referendum in the Eelam Tamil homeland and in the diaspora to allow the Eelam Tamil Nation to exercise its right to self determination and express its desire for statehood. In this sense, the initial strategy of the Formation Committee was to address the issue of the right to self determination first and the formation of the sovereign state thereafter. In the communications of the Formation Committee, the right to self determination had been described as the horse and the independent and sovereign state

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<sup>22</sup> This body was being called Kaddamaippu in Tamil, which holds the meaning of structure (and this paper uses the word Kaddamaippu hereafter).

of Tamil Eelam as the cart.<sup>23</sup> This position was not accepted by those who proposed the counter model – they accused Rudrakumaran and those who worked with him on the formation of the TGTE of having a hidden agenda to give up the demand for Tamil Eelam. In this way, purpose of forming the TGTE was questioned and conspiracy theories regarding a betrayal of the Tamil Eelam cause were spread among the Tamil diaspora. This, different positions related to strategy were the second ground for the tensions among the activists.

In the formation of the TGTE, the members of the Advisory Committee had eventually taken all the conflicting views into analysis and worked out the modalities for forming the TGTE. To organise the ground work for the formation process, Country Working Groups were set up. The Advisory Committee came out with its preliminary report on 14 January 2010 and released it for public consultation. Following two months allowed for public consultation, the final report was released on 15 March 2010.<sup>24</sup> Through the analysis of conflicting issues and the consultation process, the Advisory Committee made a fundamental change in the strategy issue discussed above. It was declared that in order to avoid any confusion on the aim of forming the TGTE, it was decided to explicitly declare the aim of the TGTE as working for the independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam. Though the strategy issue was resolved, the resistance from the *Kaddamaippu* continued and obstacles were put to the Formation Committee's work. With the support of the Tamil diaspora political activists who rallied around the Formation Committee, it moved forward and announced elections on 2 May 2010 and declared that the first Assembly of the TGTE would convene during 17-19 May 2010, the first anniversary period of the final phase of the war and the massacre that took place in the Mullivaikal area. Having realized that it would not be possible to stop the elections to the TGTE, people belonging to *Kaddamaippu* changed their strategy and came forward to contest the elections. Though there had been some cases of election misconduct reported, these self-declared elections were held in reasonably acceptable manner and the TGTE's Inaugural Ceremony and the sitting of the first Assembly took place between 17 and 19 May 2010 in the US city of Philadelphia (in the same venue where the US constitution was drafted and ratified). In the meantime, the plan for forming NCCs continued. Referendums on the Vadukodai Resolution were conducted in 10 countries and NCCs were formed in 5 countries through elections, with more to come.<sup>25</sup>

As a parallel move, while the formation process of TGTE and NCCs were progressing, a separate initiative surfaced towards forming a global forum for the diaspora Tamil organisations. This initiative was a continuation of a meeting of representatives from the diaspora organisations held in London, UK in March 2009 in the name of a World Tamil Forum. Though the organisers of the March meeting were keen to launch this World Tamil Forum as a representative body of the diaspora organisations at the time the meeting was held, the idea did not get the approval of the LTTE and was dropped. After May 2009, when the

23 See the press statement of the formation committee of TGTE, 20 January 2010, <http://govtamileelam.com/gov/index.php/archive/93-2010-01-15-01-23-41> (28.02.2011).

24 The final version of the TGTE advisory committee report is available at <http://govtamileelam.com/gov/> (28.02.2011).

25 The first referendum for reaffirming the Vadukodai Resolution was held in Norway on 10 May 2009 (before LTTE was fully militarily defeated). One of the pioneers of the first referendum Mr. Sundar (KP Aravindan) held a different view after and expressed his dissent against the referendum. There were also different of opinions on using the name of the Vadukodai Resolution (one argument being that history had moved 30 years since the original Vadukodai Resolution and to use the name could suggest going back) which resulted in the name being avoided in some countries, especially in the UK and France. Countries where the referendums were held are Norway, Canada, France, Netherlands, Denmark, UK, Switzerland, Germany Italy and Australia. NCCs were formed in Norway, Switzerland, France, Canada and Italy. Some NCCs have also signed an agreement with another Tamil Diaspora organization called Tamil against Genocide (TAG) in order to move forward actions against the Sri Lankan government on allegations of war crimes and genocide charges.

LTTE lost control of the Vanni to the Sri Lankan military, the initiative surfaced again and diaspora activists belonging to key diaspora organisations in different countries such as British Tamil Forum in the UK, USTPAC in the United States, Canadian Tamil Congress from Canada and several other organisations in other countries continued their efforts. This resulted in the formation of the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) with a soft launch in August 2009 in Paris and a more formal launch in February 2010 in the British House of Commons in London. The special guest for the formal launch was the then British Foreign Secretary, Hon David Miliband. GTF has its headquarters in London and is actively engaged in war crimes prosecution and other political and human rights activities against the Sri Lanka government. According to its constitution, the GTF would have one Tamil organisation representing each country, with that organisation being the one with the largest number of paying members.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from these political formations, a youth organisation called Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO) functions transnationally through country based organisations with a person to coordinate its transnational activities. The TYO was formed a decade ago and had played a crucial role in many international capitals in the protest activities between January and May 2009. The TYO had strong centralized planning and coordination before May 2009 and maintained connections with the LTTE in the Vanni. Post-May 2009, the TYO seems to function with more independence at country levels and the transnational coordination is based on loose connections, compared to pre-May 2009.

Having briefly discussed the formation process and tensions prevailing between diaspora political transnational formations, it would be beneficial to outline some observations regarding the current transnational political activism among the Tamil diaspora.

There has been greater diversity in Tamil transnational political activities post-May 2009 in terms of organisations and political programmes. Pre-May, Tamil diaspora transnational activism largely took place within the organisational structure of the LTTE, whether loosely or tightly connected with the LTTE headquarters. Post-May 2009, though the legacy of the LTTE still prevails, activities take place outside the LTTE. The TGTE and GTF operate largely independently and the politics advocated by these two organisations is the non-violent mode of politics taken up through political and diplomatic means. These organisations in a way transform the LTTE supportive community of Tamil diaspora from that supporting an armed struggle based liberation politics to one supporting (and taking forward) non-violent liberation politics through their activities.

In contrast to pre-May 2009, when the LTTE held political leadership of the Eelam Tamil homeland and of the diaspora, post-May 2009 sees two different leaderships; in the homeland the TNA has emerged as the legitimate leadership, and in the diaspora, the TGTE has been emerging as the political leadership. In a situation where resistance towards TGTE still emanates from the *Kaddamaippu*, it may take some time to assess real outcome of the dynamics, especially in the diaspora.

The relationship between the ground and the diaspora and the relationship between different diaspora political formations have not clearly evolved yet. The political formations on the ground have willingly or unwillingly dropped the demand for an independent state of

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<sup>26</sup> For further information of Global Tamil Forum (GTF), see [www.globaltamilforum.org](http://www.globaltamilforum.org).

Tamil Eelam. In the diaspora, the main political goal is to achieve an independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam. With these different political programmes it would seem difficult to form a direct working relationship between the organisations on the ground and in the diaspora, but it is here that possibilities for informal understanding and coordination exist.

There has not been any meaningful, official dialogue between the TGTE, GTF and NCCs on any common working programmes yet<sup>27</sup>. The TGTE's executive body consists of a cabinet including the Prime Minister and 10 Ministers. The GTF has its own governing body from the representatives from the founding members. In few countries, such as Norway, France and Italy, the respective NCCs represent the country organisations at GTF.

The perspective of diaspora political formations is that the Eelam Tamil Nation lives in a single space with different sites, with those living in the homeland site not having the political space to express their real political aspirations due to the homeland being militarily occupied by the Sri Lankan armed forces.<sup>28</sup> The TGTE also announced that it recognised the need for a pragmatic approach taken by the leaders in the homeland site on the political demand for an independent state, but called on the leadership on the ground to continue the struggle against the oppression and discrimination faced by the Tamil people in the island. The TGTE also expressed solidarity with the leaders on the ground on the right issues.<sup>29</sup> This indicates a likely convergence of the cleavage appearing in the ground and in the diaspora.

The Tamil leaders on the ground from TNA or TNPF have not expressed objections or agitations openly on the transnational political activities of Tamil diaspora. TNA and TNPF have also started to establish their contact networks among the Tamil diaspora. A section of Tamil diaspora funded the election expenses of TNA and TNPF during the parliamentary elections held in April 2010. This indicates that the leaders on the ground also recognised that the Tamil diaspora is part of an Eelam Tamil polity.

## 5. Future of Tamil Transnational Political Activism

This section attempts to outline some possible scenarios for Tamil diaspora transnational political activism. This paper predicts three possible scenarios.

**The first scenario** would see transnational diaspora activism evolving as a political force connecting the ground directly and indirectly on the political demand of the Eelam Tamil people, while also connecting Tamil people in Tamil Nadu and the rest of the world. In a global situation, with strong calls for a war crime inquiry and support for a political solution to the problems of the Tamil people in the island of Sri Lanka, there is also a strong conviction that there is no space for an armed struggle in the island and a political solution shall be found within a united Sri Lanka. In such a situation, the political formations in the diaspora, on the ground in Sri Lanka and Eelam Tamil supportive political formations in Tamil Nadu

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<sup>27</sup> However, there have been some individual level contacts.

<sup>28</sup> This is view often expressed by the TGTE Prime minister, Rudrakumaran.

<sup>29</sup> This was expressed in a press statement by Rudrakumaran in press statement on 1 January 2011.

and other parts of the world could form a clear strategy, absorbing the conditions prevailing in various sites, to move forward the struggle.

Imagine the following strategy: Leaders on the ground put forward the demand for a federal solution for a merged North–East Tamil territory with executive powers in key areas. If the Sri Lanka government does not agree with the proposal (and it would be the most probable response from it), the TNA and other Tamil political formations (including the TNPF and civil society) engage in political protests in various ways. At the same time, political formations in the diaspora focus on war crimes and genocide charges against the Sri Lankan government and also justify the position of independent state through the principle of self determination, citing the non-willingness of the Sri Lankan government to agree to the federal solution put forward on the ground. Here, a mutual agreement between the leaders on the ground and in the diaspora could emerge towards working on two different programmes with a common strategy of getting international support for the Tamils' right to self determination. The supporting networks in Tamil Nadu and other parts of the world could join in this as partners in the common strategy.

If the political formations could overcome all the odds and form a common strategy with different political programmes and if they are able to unite by ignoring or giving up their differences for the common cause, there are chances that Tamil transnational political activism becomes a political force capable of achieving results.

**The second scenario** is one where Tamil diaspora transnational activism loses its momentum due to the conflict and tensions among the diaspora political formations and also due to fear and other self interest of the political leaders on the ground. Thus the vigour of the political activism loses its currency among Eelam Tamil people in the diaspora and in the homeland. There are some indications to show that people are losing interest in political activism and in their involvement in politics. In such a scenario, there is the likelihood of people becoming depoliticized and a depoliticized people, over a period, would contribute to lack of enthusiasm for political activism.

A possible **third scenario** would be the continuing political transnational activism in the diaspora with the sense of forming an independent Tamil state with leadership coming from second and coming generation Tamils for prolonged period while political aspirations of the people on the ground is suppressed. The political activism of the second and coming generations is dependent on a number of factors. One important factor would be the ability to preserve the collective memory of the victimhood and the injustices suffered by the Tamil people at the hands of successive Sri Lankan regimes with the support of global powers. The actions of the present and future successive governments of Sri Lanka that deny equality and justice to the people who suffered through war would contribute to greater political activism among the future generations of Tamil diaspora. The living experiences in the countries of settlement also would contribute to the political transnationalism of the next generations.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This paper, while taking a brief overview on theoretical perspectives of transnational practices and of transnational political activism, has discussed Tamil transnational activism by employing a transnational optic that questions the validity of the concept of long distance nationalism. Tamil transnational activism pre-May 2009 was seen through the emergence of the LTTE as a transnational political formation. Post-May 2009, the political formations of the TGTE, GTF and NCCs and tensions around the political formations have been discussed. The paper has also discussed three possible scenarios of Tamil transnational political activism in the future.

A final point should be made that apart from the three future scenarios discussed above, some sections of the Tamil diaspora (and international security establishments, including the Sri Lankan state) have also expressed a view regarding the renewal of armed resistance to the Sri Lankan government. The viability of such a scenario seems very low considering the conditions in the Tamil homeland and in the diaspora today. In contrast to Tamil nationhood perspective, there is small group of people engaged in political activism in building a nation with a Sri Lankan identity. In a scenario where the Sri Lankan state has lost its pluralistic character and become an agent of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, this paper predicts this effort would also fail in its take off.

While analytically presenting and discussing more than three decades of historical evolution of the Eelam Tamil Nation's fight for nationhood, this paper argues and advocates a need for a transnational perspective that sees the homeland and the diaspora as a single space or field. At the same time it is also important to understand that there are people in the homeland and in the diaspora who have not become politically active. In this sense, the paper does not assume that each and every member of the Tamil diaspora was actively engaged in the Tamil diaspora political activism, but looks at the field where activism takes place.

Though this paper briefly mentions the involvement of the second and future generations, the space and the scope of the paper does not allow it to go into this phenomenon further. Research indicates that the influence of the parents with transnational connections was considerably large on their children. This and the impact of Tamil parents on their children with regards to transnational political engagement and the nature of Tamil transnational political activism of the younger generation could be the subject of another interesting study.

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