
A cavalcade of deadly blunders

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V.S. Sambandan If in the end the LTTE found itself reduced to a group on the run, it had none but itself to blame. A continuum of blunders lay behind the downfall of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which not too long ago was seen as an "invincible" force that would continue to engage the Sri Lankan state in an endless and debilitating war. Through phases of peace and war, the LTTE committed the series of blunders in terms of concept, structure and judgment. It may well be that these blunders reduced the Sri Lankan Tamils' "struggle for independence" of the 1980s to what the Sri Lankan state and the international community could easily categorise as "a war on terror";

The first of the historic blunders lay in the LTTE not judging Indian sentiment in the 1980s as it rejected the India-Sri Lanka Agreement and fought the Indian Peace Keeping Force. Then, in 1991, it assassinated Rajiv Gandhi. The resulting alienation of the Indian polity cost the Tigers dear. It also opened up space for successive Sri Lankan governments to co-opt India and the rest of the world into its "war against terror". The next, and most fatal, blunder was to enforce a boycott in Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking north and east of the 2005 presidential election. That led to the defeat of Ranil Wickremesinghe and the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa. These crowning blunders, though they came decades apart, point to the LTTE's failure to read emerging political pointers correctly, and to realistically judge where it stood in the context of Sri Lankan, subcontinental and international political dynamics. In addition, an aggregation of mistakes coalesced over the years and reduced the once-monolithic organisation to a group of terrorists scattered and on the run. At a conceptual level, the LTTE went for an "all-or-nothing" approach since the start. This, coupled with its resolve that a separate Tamil Eelam would have to be won through "military means," meant that the LTTE scuttled every attempt at a negotiated settlement to the ethnic crisis: the India-mediated Thimpu talks in 1985, the far-reaching devolution package presented by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, and the Norway-facilitated peace talks with successive Colombo governments between 2002 and 2006. The LTTE's refusal to meaningfully engage the Sri Lankan governments politically reduced serious international facilitation efforts to exercises in futility. The LTTE's fanatic insistence that it should be the "sole representative" of the Sri Lankan Tamils was another conceptual mistake. This set the stage, and created a "justification" for, the wiping out of virtually all the other Tamil militant groups, particularly those that differed from the LTTE in their political leanings: the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

Assassinations Outside the spectrum of Sri Lankan Tamil militant groups, this "sole representative" ideology led to the assassination of several democratic Tamil leaders who had championed the political cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils. They included A. Amirthalingam (1989) and Neelan Tiruchelvam (1999). Several other assassinations also snuffed out democratic Tamil voices. For the LTTE, anyone who did not support it was a "traitor". This led to the alienation of other Tamil groups — and the rise of authoritarianism. In structural terms, the group's intolerance of dissent in any form, particularly over the past few years, was at the root of its implosion. This aversion for dissent came to the fore with the revolt by V. Muralitharan alias Colonel Karuna, the former Batticaloa-Amparai "special commander," in 2004. In the latest military advance by the Sri Lankan forces, the absence of an LTTE fighting unit in the east meant that the Sri Lankan state could concentrate its security forces in the northern theatre of operations rather than spreading them thin. Another structural mistake was to make no difference between its political and military wings. Although the LTTE has a registered political party, the People's Front of Liberation Tigers, it has remained dormant through its existence. This fusion of the political and military wings, unlike in the case of the Irish Republican Army/Sinn Fein, did not give the group any space for political engagement, within Sri Lanka or elsewhere. The absence of a separate political unit meant that political voices such as those of Anton S. Balasingham, or other entrants during the short-lived Norway-facilitated peace talks, could find no space within the groups, and were always subject to the LTTE's militarist-terrorist mode. This clearly manifested when the LTTE informally sidelined Balasingham after 2002, for having agreed "to explore federal options" for a solution to the separatist conflict. For the LTTE, political negotiations were merely exercises in buying time for a next round of hostilities. The worst one Of all these peace-time blunders, the worst was its diktat to the Tamil electorate to stay away from the 2005 presidential poll. The LTTE's hope, then, was to recreate a 1983-like situation in which the Sri Lankan state would be seen internationally as an "aggressor". It did not realise that Sri Lanka, and the rest of the world, had meanwhile moved on and that they no longer saw the LTTE as a "liberator". By then, it was but an internationally banned terrorist group that stood in the way of peace in Sri Lanka. Courtesy: Hindu.com