
Prabhakaran: the setting of the Sun God

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by Dayan Jayatilaka In this handout photo taken Tuesday, May 19, 2009, and released by the Sri Lankan Army, the army claims to show the body of Tamil Tiger rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in Mullaittivu. The degree of denial of Prabhakaran's death within the expatriate Tamil consciousness is the best evidence of the pathology of Tamil ultra-nationalism. Rohana Wijeweera's followers were fanatics, but when their leader was gone, they did not go into mass denial. The hardcore elements of the Tamil Diaspora really have to get their heads around it: Elvis has left the building. The Sun God has set, and his son won't be rising either.

The Tigers were among the best known brands in the terrorist universe and by defeating them so completely and utterly Sri Lanka and its armed forces have made a contribution to regional and global security and stability. They have made an example of the Tigers and thus made the world a safer place. Precious little thanks we have got for it. In the movie 'Lethal Weapon', when the villains take his partner's family hostage and he plans to rescue them, Mel Gibson (playing Martin Riggs) tells Danny Glover (playing his cop partner Roger Murtaugh) "we're going to get bloody on this one – you know that don't you?". Well, we were always going to have to get bloody on this one, the final battles to destroy Prabhakaran, and that's the way it played itself out. From Berlin to Grozny, such endgames are anything but pretty but that's the way it goes when the enemy is fascist or simply fanatical. We did it much better than most – no extensive use of airpower and no antipersonnel bombs – and the only ones I can think of who have done better, were led by someone that the UN General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto has recently called "a saint": Fidel Castro. Fidel is an exception. (But let me not mount my favorite hobby horse – my views on Fidel's ethics of violence are critically discussed in the current issues of Radical Philosophy and the 'International Journal of Zizek Studies'.) Prabhakaran was a monster who laid waste to the land and tormented its people, and he was slain, as monsters should be. It will be argued that Prabhakaran was made into a monster by the Sinhalese. That's a cop out. As I told an audience at Jaffna university in 1982, which almost certainly included LTTE cadres, the National Guard of Nicaraguan dictator Somoza was in the habit of applying lard on the genitals of political prisoners and unleashing attack dogs on them – and yet, the Sandinista guerrillas were among the most humane and discriminating in their use of violence, which greatly contributed to their victory. Furthermore, the nature of Sinhala oppression does not in any way explain Prabhakaran's war against the IPKF and the Indo-Lanka accord, followed up by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. In a Karmic cyclical coincidence, Prabhakaran paid the price as Rajiv's family was swept into office and that too, just days before Rajiv's 18th death anniversary. (By the way, the humanistic Sandinista revolution crested with the bazooka shell fired by Gorriaran Merlo, the leader of the Argentinean ERP, destroying exiled dictator Somoza in his armored Mercedes in the capital of Paraguay a year later.) Prabhakaran had piled up too many blood debts, in more than one party, community and country, and his fanatical fans overseas had made too much of what he and his core cadre would be capable of when they slipped the Sri Lankan cordon, for things to end in a less complete and final manner. The call for "humanitarian access" must not be a cover for peaceful R2P or incremental "humanitarian interventionism," achieving through the back door that which was repelled at the front gates. Those who dream and conspire of war crimes tribunals, which would punish Sri Lanka for having decapitated their favorite terrorists, have to dust off their political science (or at least in one case simply consult their illustrious father). Such international kangaroo courts succeed with defeated states and leaderships, or leaders of fragmented, failed or failing states – not a strong successful unified one like Sri Lanka, which has just won a war, exhibiting steely determination. Sri Lanka is also in the wrong continent and the wrong neighborhood for vicious nonsense of this sort to have more than nuisance value and prove anything much beyond a heuristic device to educate a nation. How can one describe and define the friends of our mortal enemy the Tigers? So where are we now? Forget the grudging assessments of wiseacres that it is only the "conventional war" or "territorial war" that is over. The national territory of Sri Lanka has been reunified after a quarter century or more, but that is not all. The Tiger army lies destroyed on the battlefield (the stragglers are being hunted down) and the Tiger leadership has been eliminated even more thoroughly, than the JVP's was. In 1988, I published a series entitled 'Unfinished War, Protracted Crisis', in the 'Lanka Guardian', which reappeared as a book, Sri Lanka: 'The Travails of a Democracy', published by Vikas, New Delhi in 1995. In it I made the basic point that while Prabhakaran always fought a total war, his enemies, the Sri Lankan state and the Indian state fought a limited war. For me, this was the secret of Prabhakaran's success and the central weakness that we had to overcome. In these writings, and in commentaries over the last 10 years in the (now defunct) 'Weekend Express' and 'The Island', I drew attention to three other points: though tactically and organizationally brilliant, Prabhakaran, when viewed from a comparative international and historical point of view, was a strategic failure even in comparison with the Hezbollah, let alone the Vietnamese; the need to follow General Giap in privileging the "annihilation of the living forces of the enemy," over territorial acquisition; and the fact that Prabhakaran had never really faced simultaneous offensives on several fronts. With the Rajapakse administration it all came together and fused: a leader and commander in chief with the requisite political will; a recomposed power bloc with a hegemonic fraction that had a strongly nationalist and even a martial tradition and came from a province with a patriotic-martial heritage and consciousness; the leadership in all three services, especially the army, which had joined a military in combat and had matured in war; public opinion that rejected appeasement and had learned the hard way that only the military defeat of the Tigers would set the nation free at last. Prabhakaran's monstrosity had its roots and sources and these are not located in Sinhala oppression but closer home. When an authentic reformist option is proffered (and in September 1987, after the Thillepan fast, the LTTE was conceded seven out of 12 seats including the chairmanship, of an interim council of a merged Northeast, with the Sri Lankan army confined to barracks), fanatics tend to reject these and continue

the struggle for the original maximum objective. However, they lose the support of the bulk of the people who then shift to the side of the ex-terrorist militants striving to work the system. The most revealing moment of Tamil ultranationalist consciousness came when the LTTE fought India and later, murdered Rajiv Gandhi. Prabhakaran was not marginalized within the Tamil community. The ultranationalist Tamil mainstream stuck by him and the Tigers in a war that was not against the Sinhala foe but against a secular quasi-federal democratic republic, in which Tamils had a linguistic region. That takes us to the heart of the problem. The self-image of Tamil ultra-nationalism is such that it is hostile to India when the latter does not simply forgive and forget the Rajiv murder and extend unconditional patronage to the Tamil secessionist cause. This is clear from the demonstrations in the Diaspora to the street attack on an Indian army truck in Tamil Nadu. What the Indian people in general and the Tamil Nadu people in particular thought about it is evident in the voting patterns in the recently concluded Indian elections. It is the hubristic arrogance of Tamil ultra-nationalism that saw demoniac incarnation in Prabhakaran, and brought on itself crushing defeat under the guns of the Sri Lankan armed forces. The truth is that Tamil ultra-nationalism (even in the peaceful form of the TNA) is rejectionist, in that it rejects the limits of the possible as defined by the Indo-Lanka consensus: "maximum devolution within the Sri Lankan constitution," (as Pranab Mukherjee puts it), starting with the reactivation of the 13th amendment. Thus, there is a contradiction between Tamil ultra-nationalism and the existing state system of South Asia. The former demands a rupture of and with the latter, but has no capacity of enforcing it, while the sole realistic option is the reform of and within the existing state system. For their part, the Sinhala nationalists and ultra-nationalists must know that the joint Indo-Lanka press statement of May 21, 2009, which must be prudently read as almost a coda or annexure to President Rajapakse's May 19th and 22nd speeches, also represents the minimum commitment that has to be kept, the lowest price that has to be paid, for the assurance of neighborhood and regional support without which Sri Lanka cannot offset Western pressure and the Western-Tiger Diaspora bloc. Tamil nationalism has failed in its successive projects: 50:50, federalism and nonviolent agitation, full-on secessionist war, incarnated in the Tamil Congress, the Federal party and the TULF, the Tamil Eelam armed movement and the Tigers. No return to any of these is going to work. Even decades down the road, any attempt to revive terrorist or guerrilla war will result in a swift and decisive State response informed by the lessons of temporizing that cost us dearly. The Sri Lankan armed forces is saturated with officers and men steeled in the experience of successful warfare, and this will give us a formidable military machine for many years, even decades, to come. This leaves the famous Diaspora option. While the Tiger army has been decimated, the Tiger movement still exists, is global, and has a higher profile than ever before. It is a threat to the Sri Lankan state and society but it cannot deliver Tamil Eelam because a small minority really cannot carve out a separate state on a small island on which the vast majority is unalterably opposed to the idea, is willing to pay a heavy price and wage war to prevent such an outcome, and will always throw up a leadership capable of doing so. If there is another Prabhakaran, as some portentously claim there will be, there will also be another Mahinda Rajapakse, another Gotabhaya Rajapakse and another Sarath Fonseka. The details are now beginning to leak (see reports in the 'Telegraph', UK and the 'Weekend Australian') of last ditch, high level efforts in certain Western quarters to save the Tiger leadership. These pressures and conspiracies probably sealed the Tigers' fate ever tighter. They give us a glimpse of the networks out there and the games some people play. The external danger should neither be underestimated nor overestimated. Prabhakaran's Tigers could not prevail but they damaged our country and its prospects; distorted our lives. So also the globalized Tiger movement: it cannot prevail but it must be combated and defeated. The crisis of Sri Lanka's external relations is a post-Kadirgamar crisis. The external threat to Sri Lanka will require the maturation of conditions and consciousness to the precise point that it did in the case of the military threat posed by Prabhakaran, which led to the evolution and emergence as a vanguard, of the most able elements available. External pressure, especially extra-regional pressure (involving or based in ex-colonial states) hardly ever causes the widening of political space in a Third World country. In most Asian contexts, it generates a backlash and de-legitimizes the cause it espouses, discrediting perhaps unfairly, the minorities and minority politicians as allies of hostile external forces. Even where the context is not one of ethnic polarization, patronage from adversarial external sources only de-legitimizes local actors. If the Tiger Diaspora wants a separate state or a confederation, it had better seek it in one of the countries in which they are concentrated, because it is certainly not going to be achieved either on the island of Sri Lanka or the soil of India. If any elements in the West sympathize or support such a cause they had better grant it on their soil, because it ain't gonna happen anywhere in South Asia. Overseas Tamil secessionism and its neo-imperialist patrons will find that Asia is a continent too far. (The writer states these are strictly his personal views) Courtesy: Island.lk