

Sri Lanka must move beyond Triumphalism and Bitterness

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Sixteen years ago, Sri Lanka emerged from one of the bloodiest civil conflicts in modern Asia. The military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended a nearly

three-decade war that cost tens of thousands of lives, displaced entire communities, and left deep scars on the national psyche.

For many Sri Lankans, the end of the LTTE marks the return of peace. For others, it revives unresolved grief. But as a nation it is time to move beyond both triumphalism and bitterness. Reconciliation—genuine, inclusive, and forward-looking is the only viable path.

The LTTE was one of the most ruthless terrorist organizations of its time. It pioneered suicide bombings, forcibly conscripted children, and assassinated elected leaders—including Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Yet disturbingly, efforts to romanticize the group and its leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, have gained renewed currency in some quarters. Such narratives erase the fact that many of the LTTE's victims were Tamil moderates — people who believed in democratic solutions. Eminent figures such as Lakshman Kadirgamar, Neelan Tiruchelvam, A. Amirthalingam, and Alfred Duraipappah were assassinated precisely because they posed a credible alternative to violence. The LTTE systematically eliminated internal dissent, tightening its authoritarian grip on Tamil society. Understanding how this insurgency came to dominate Sri Lanka's politics requires looking beyond its borders. In the 1980s, Sri Lanka's shift toward a liberalized, pro-western economy under President J.R. Jayewardene unsettled India. Fearing strategic encirclement, New Delhi initially supported Tamil militant groups. Domestic politics in Tamil Nadu, with its strong emotional ties to Sri Lankan Tamils, further shaped Indian policy. But what began as geopolitical maneuvering soon became a Frankenstein's monster. When LTTE violence escalated, India deployed peacekeeping forces, resulting in the sacrifice of over 1,000 Indian soldiers in a tragic and complex intervention. This culminated in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, after which India recalibrated its approach. In the final years of the war, India provided crucial diplomatic and intelligence support to Sri Lanka and has since advocated an apolitical settlement based on devolution and inclusion.

Sri Lanka's Tamil community had legitimate grievances that should have been addressed through constitutional means and inclusive governance. The country has had a universal franchise since 1931, and its democratic system, though not perfect, offered avenues for reform. Terrorism only depended on divisions and prolonged suffering.

The war's end under President Mahinda Rajapaksa brought a chance to rebuild. His administration accomplished what many believed was impossible: the military defeat of a powerful terrorist group. Yet the peace that followed lacked closure. More than a million Sri Lankans —mostly Tamils — have been resettled abroad. Many have built successful lives in the West, holding positions of influence in their adopted countries. Sri Lanka's loss has, in

many respects, been the West's gain. Successive governments have struggled to reconnect with this diaspora. Trust remains fractured. Worse, some diaspora voices and political actors remain locked in the past — vilifying Sri Lanka on global platforms and casting the Sinhalese population in monolithic, antagonistic terms. This approach does not serve justice; it entrenches division.

Grievance must not become identity. Activism that seeks to delegitimize an entire country risks alienating younger generations from any meaningful process of reconciliation. If the Tamil diaspora is committed to Sri Lanka's future, it must focus on healing, not reopening wounds. But reconciliation is not the responsibility of the Tamil community alone. Sinhala political leaders must move beyond majoritarian complacency. A pluralist democracy cannot thrive without equal dignity and opportunity for all. Reconciliation is not about forgetting the past — it is about refusing to be imprisoned by it.

The challenges are no longer simply ethnic. The 2019 Easter Sunday bombings by Islamist extremists exposed other societal fractures. Like the Tamil one, the Muslim community must be part of the national healing process. Exclusion breeds radicalism; inclusion builds resilience. Perhaps the most troubling legacy of the war is the hopelessness that many young Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnicity, feel. Amid economic collapse, political dysfunction, and deep mistrust, many see their future abroad. That is a tragedy no military victory can redeem.

Sixteen years on, memory matters— but so does imagination. This is a moment for introspection, for shedding inherited resentments, and for building a national vision that transcends ethnicity and history. Revenge is not the answer. Nor is retribution. The only way for-ward is forward.

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