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How the Tigers Got Their Stripes: A Case Study of the LTTE's Rise to Power

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of six months in 1986, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) eliminated their rival militant organizations, despite being significantly outgunned and outmanned by some of these groups. Relying primarily on contemporaneous accounts in Tamil and English, this article traces the process by which the LTTE became the primary avatar of Tamil nationalism, and explores the question of why consolidation unfolded so violently in this case. We argue that the answer lies in the LTTE's successful portrayal of this violence as order-upholding rather than destructive, and attribute their ability to do this to the fact that much of the population perceived the LTTE as the most legitimate user of violence among the militants.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Crossing into LTTE-controlled territory in 2005 presented a stark contrast with the inefficient operations on the Sri Lankan side of the border. LTTE immigration officials checked passports, issued travel passes, and confirmed payment of customs duties in a matter of minutes.¹ Once approved, the visitor entered Tamil Eelam, where the full-blown border service was matched by a courts system, police force, and civil administration.

Along with their operation of a remarkably robust proto-state, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, often referred to as the Tamil Tigers) are known for their sophisticated military operation, which included an effective naval wing as well as a nascent air force, and for their innovative use of violence, including both suicide bombings and cyber-attacks. The Tigers' stunning success as an insurgent organization (until their equally stunning defeat) encourages a teleological story of their origins, which is reinforced by scholarly accounts of the era. As Sharika Thiranagama observes: "The sparse literature on the period treats popular militancy through discussions of the LTTE, which has led to accounts treating the period only as part of the LTTE's rise to power and equating the LTTE with popular militancy and with Tamils at large."² But in fact, Tamil militancy in the 1980s was characterized by a profusion of competing organizations, of which the LTTE was neither the biggest nor the best armed.

In the following pages, we trace the LTTE's emergence as the dominant Tamil militant group. On its face, the question "how did the LTTE consolidate power over

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its rivals” is a straightforward one. But in any context marked by intense political violence, establishing a historical record is contentious enough, never mind attempting to uncover the reasons events unfolded the way they did. And as the Tamil polity, both in Sri Lanka and the diaspora, continues to grapple with what nationalism looks like after military defeat, the question of the Tigers’ legacy is a vexed one.

In Section I, we outline some of the challenges presented by the deeply contested nature of this history, as well as our approach to gathering information and analyzing the contradictions contained therein. Section II provides a detailed timeline of the early Tamil militancy and sketches in the process of consolidation in this case, which includes both cooperative and competitive elements but was ultimately characterized by violent coercion. Coercive consolidation is something of a surprise in this case, given the extreme permeability of group boundaries and the efforts of an external state sponsor (India), which, in line with the predictions in this special issue’s framing paper, went to great lengths to promote cooperative consolidation. Section III analyzes the divergent explanations offered of the LTTE’s rise to power. We pull from these accounts several emergent themes, which we then use in Section IV to build a theory of how and why the LTTE coercively consolidated power over its rivals. We suggest that the key to understanding this case lies in the LTTE’s successful portrayal of itself as holders of a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within the Tamil community.

Challenges Presented by This Research and Methodological Approach

The LTTE had a decades-long tenure as the primary avatar of Tamil nationalist aspirations and in its afterlife continues to loom large in both Tamil and Sri Lankan politics. Twelve years after the war’s formal end, life in northeastern Sri Lanka is lived under military occupation, a condition justified as necessary by the state to prevent the LTTE’s return. Pervasive surveillance and legal restrictions on memorializing the movement operate as harsh constraints on the community’s ability to remember the Tigers.³ Yet in part as a consequence of this repression, proximity to the LTTE remains central to Tamil politicians’ claims to legitimacy.⁴ Together, these dynamics mean that speech about the Tigers is heavily policed, externally by the threat of state violence, and internally by the kind of insistence on message discipline that results from extreme political marginalization.

The details of LTTE’s early history are hard to see beneath this dense overlay of politics and trauma built up around the subsequent life and death of the armed movement. Given its dominance of Tamil politics for over a quarter century, it is no surprise that the LTTE has been the subject of a number of competing narratives. As we explain in some detail in Section IV below, one of the distinctive features of the group is that, from the earliest days, it devoted significant resources to what might be called “brand cohesion.” The LTTE brand highlighted competence, discipline, and devotion to the Tamil nationalist cause. For other actors, other characteristics were salient in the development of politically instrumental frames. For internal opposition, the group’s intolerance for dissent justified a designation of the movement as fascist.⁵ The Sri

Lankan state consistently described the Tigers as “fanatical” and “brainwashed,” although at various points in the conflict got political mileage out of highlighting its military strength and efficiency. (And, especially after 9/11, insistently referred to the group as terrorists.) Finally, external commentators, particularly Indian and Western military and terrorism analysts, seemingly settled on three adjectives in 1987 and never looked back: “ruthless,” “fanatical,” and “lethal.”

Accounts adopting these varying frames tell markedly different stories about the movement’s early days. The challenge of assigning weight to mutually inconsistent accounts is one that faces all researchers of history and is surmountable to a certain extent. But another problem became apparent as we started to compare accounts of the LTTE’s origins and consolidation of power: The early history of the group as told by commentators varies significantly over time.

It is no groundbreaking insight to point out that history is never fixed and that both the salience and meaning of past events varies with the political dynamics of the present,⁶ and some of the inconsistencies we observe likely evince a shift in which voices were dominant at different moments. But we think there’s something else worth highlighting here, which is that this history is noticeably unsettled.

For individual Tamils and for the Tamil community both on and off the island, the Tigers and the armed struggle more generally have meant different things at different times. And the imposition of silences by a variety of actors, including the LTTE, over decades has had a profound impact on what stories about the movement could be told, and by who, at what times. These dynamics, and external commentators’ tendency to reify these stories as exemplars of broader claims about ethno-nationalism, civil war, or terrorism, have meant there is substantial instability to the narratives in both primary and secondary sources.

Because none of this is unique to the Sri Lankan context, we take a moment to tease out some of the mechanisms through which this narrative instability is produced. Most simply, the passage of time introduces shifts to politically salient “facts.” Accounts of history change due to the tellers’ teleological instinct to create consistent narratives, highlighting those threads in the past that appear consistent with a current status quo. Commentators writing after the collapse of the armed struggle tell different stories about the LTTE’s early years than did those, for instance, writing in 2002–2006 when the Tigers were operating a robust quasi-state. Furthermore, both participants’ and observers’ interpretation of past events may shift with their own present politics. And participants may tell different stories depending on the audience they are addressing. This may be unconscious, or, in repressive environments, quite deliberate. Individuals’ stories about political contentious events often shift as their trust in their interlocutor develops. And given that both media and scholarly accounts of conflict are often based on limited personal interactions, this dynamic can aggregate up into systematic bias in the direction of a “safe” narrative. Finally, trauma can produce destabilized stories as individuals work through what their experiences mean to them. In our, and our colleagues’, repeated conversations with conflict-affected communities in northeastern Sri Lanka over a period of years, we have found some of them to express significantly divergent stances on the LTTE from one year to the next.⁷ And while some of these discrepancies might be explained by the speaker being more willing to speak freely

over time, the direction of change varies. While some might disavow a connection to the movement at first but later admit to an affinity, others are expressing a positive opinion of the movement but then later sharing criticisms and frustration.

The compounding effects of time and political contentiousness have introduced deep fractures into the accounts of the LTTE at both the individual and aggregate level, and ongoing suppression of the voices of those with the most firsthand information means that this history is likely to remain unsettled. We were therefore unwilling to assume that we would be able to tell an authoritative story of the LTTE's consolidation of power over its rivals. We also had grave doubts about the ethical acceptability of doing so at a moment when much of the affected community is prevented, under threat of violence, from telling the story (or stories) itself.

As both a methodological and ethical commitment, therefore, we attempt to tell a multivalent story of the LTTE's emergence as the dominant Tamil militant organization. Our account is based on archival materials from the militant movements themselves, contemporaneous reporting in the Tamil and international press, secondary literature, and a handful of interviews.⁸ With few exceptions, we lean toward interpreting descriptions of events from these sources as political statements, rather than as presentation of historical facts. We therefore incorporate an analysis of the context for these reports, particularly when looking at contemporaneous media coverage.

But while we follow an interpretivist approach insofar as we treat accounts of the LTTE as inherently subjective, we do not fully abandon the positivist project of attempting to explain the Tigers' trajectory. Rather, we treat the overlaps and inconsistencies between accounts as information.⁹ Our theoretical insights are generated through juxtaposing the stories told about the LTTE rather than from a straightforward reading of a presumptively cohesive historical record.

This approach is an effort to be transparent about the challenges of writing this history, and about the biases and silences in the record. It is also an effort to reckon with the impact of our own positionality. No conflict scholar is a neutral observer, but the way we went about this research was deeply influenced by our personal and professional ties to the affected community. One of us is a human rights lawyer and political scientist who has engaged in research and advocacy on wartime atrocities in Sri Lanka since 2013. The other is an Eelam Tamil human rights activist and political science PhD candidate, with numerous family members both on and off the island who were affected by the war.¹⁰

Because much of the postwar human rights activism in the Tamil diaspora grew out of structures that were previously associated with Tamil nationalist organizing, both of our networks are heavily populated by those who supported the armed struggle. Some of the archival materials we analyze here are from the personal collections of individuals who were associated with the LTTE or other militant groups and were given directly to us. As we note above, there is a broad diversity of opinions about the LTTE and the armed struggle within the Tamil community, and indeed among our own friends and colleagues, and we have sought to fairly represent that range here. But for both of us, our access to information and our analysis thereof is undoubtedly inflected by our particular positions in networks associated with the Tamil nationalist cause.

Early History of the Tamil Militancy

Sri Lanka is home to three main ethnic groups: the Sinhalese, largely Buddhist and concentrated in the south of the island; the Tamils, concentrated in the north-east; and the Muslims, who speak Tamil and have a significant presence in the north-east. A significant number of Tamils of Indian origin live in several parts of the island but are concentrated in the central hill country.

Upon independence from the British in 1948, Sinhalese politicians moved to institutionalize Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy in the makeup of the Sri Lankan state. Many in the Tamil community had long anticipated the majoritarian direction that post-independence politics would take. In 1949, Tamil lawyer and politician SJV Chelvanayakam founded the Federal Party, which demanded an autonomous, Tamil state within a federal set-up.¹¹

Following the passage of an act making Sinhala the sole official language in 1956, Tamils turned out *en masse* to protest. In response, Sinhala mobs, in some cases led by politicians, went on a rampage, killing several Tamils.¹² A far deadlier pogrom occurred two years later, after Prime Minister Bandaranaike, under pressure from the Buddhist clergy, abrogated a commitment to grant Tamils limited self-governance. Hundreds of Tamils were killed in the deadliest ethnic violence the island had seen in 40 years.¹³

As the government's unwillingness to make any concessions to Tamil demands became clear, pressure grew on the Tamil political leadership to take a more hardline position. The worsening treatment of Tamils as second-class citizens, and the violent response to peaceful protests and demands, pushed some to demand more radical solutions. In 1968, V Navaratnam of the Federal Party called for a separate state, arguing that it was futile to demand concessions from a supremacist state.¹⁴ While he was expelled from the party that year, his arguments found receptive audience among Tamil youth, particularly on the Jaffna peninsula. Student activists formed the Tamil Maanavar Peravai (Tamil Student Federation) in 1970 and mobilized to protest the Federal Party's conciliatory stance toward the Sri Lankan state.

Sri Lanka's parliament adopted a new constitution in 1972, formalizing Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy. The increasingly militant Tamil youth movement demanded that their political representatives advocate for a separate state. The Federal Party's response was to call for the formation of a unity coalition of Tamil political organizations, including the youth movement. The Tamil United Front (renamed the Tamil United Liberation Front four years later) was established on May 4, 1972.

Two weeks later, Sri Lanka launched a crackdown on Tamil student activists, arresting a total of 72, and torturing many of them. But Tamil youth mobilization had already moved beyond speechmaking and leafletting. In 1969, an informal group of underground militants had formed in Valvettithurai. Frustrated with the failure of the Federal Party to make gains on Tamil political demands, they decided to take up arms. One member, Pon Sivakumaran, would commit the first assassination attempt on a Sinhalese politician by setting a bomb under Somaweera Chandrasiri's car in September 1970. Another early associate, Velupillai Prabhakaran, would form the Tamil New Tigers in 1972, renamed as the LTTE in 1976. Others would go on to form the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) in 1979.

After the 1974 deaths of nine Tamils at a research conference in Jaffna following police action, anger boiled over. In June, Sivakumaran committed suicide by cyanide capsule after being detained by police, further inflaming tensions. His funeral was attended by thousands and was a galvanizing moment for Tamil militancy.

In July 1974, Velupillai Prabhakaran shot and killed Jaffna Mayor Alfred Duraippah, the first death caused by the Tamil militants. Two years later, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) passed the Vaddukoddai Resolution calling for an independent Tamil Eelam, earning them a mandate in the North-East in the 1977 election. In their platform, they pledged to support the establishment of Tamil Eelam through peaceful means or through “struggle,” widely seen as an endorsement of the militancy.

But as feared by the youth members of the TULF and the militants, after the election, TULF’s leaders backtracked. They accepted opposition posts in government, despite protest by activists. And soon after the election, mass violence against Tamils broke out again.

With detention and torture of Tamil youths increasing, Tamil militants escalated attacks against police officers. The government banned the LTTE and similar organizations and enacted the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979, declaring a state of emergency in Jaffna. The government ordered the military to eradicate “terrorism” by the end of that year. On the day the state of emergency was declared, the military took several Tamil youths into custody. Some were later found dead, others disappeared. Hundreds were arrested and tortured over the following months.¹⁵

In May 1981, the Jaffna Library, a revered repository of Tamil knowledge, was burned down, with the apparent involvement of two government ministers. Violence against Tamil businesses and institutions spread across the country and was particularly acute in the eastern border villages. In response to these attacks, and the findings of a commission alleging state complicity in the 1977 violence, the government passed the Indemnity Act of 1982.¹⁶ The Act gave blanket immunity to all civilian and military officials for any act “done or purported to be done with a view to restoring law and order” from 1977 forward.

Meanwhile the TULF had agreed in talks with the government to put demands for Tamil Eelam on hold, causing widespread anger amongst their constituents. With state violence against Tamils increasing, the LTTE called for a boycott of elections in May 1983. The subsequent low turnout “reflected a severe disruption of the electoral process in Jaffna and represented a sharp jolt to the TULF claim to speak for a united Sri Lanka Tamil nation.”¹⁷

Black July

July 1983, subsequently known as “Black July,” saw a vicious pogrom against Tamils. On July 23, mob attacks by Sinhala civilians supported by the security forces erupted across the island. Violence was concentrated in Colombo and the Hill Country, where thousands of Tamils were killed and the economic backbone of the Tamil community in the south was destroyed. Sinhala mobs roamed the streets attacking Tamils and their property, armed in some cases with voter lists to help them identify targets. The police looked on and, in some cases, participated.

Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were displaced, fleeing to the North-East and abroad.

The targeting of Tamils during Black July extended to inmates at the Welikada prison, which housed numerous Tamil political prisoners, including Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) leaders who had been on death row since their arrests in 1981. On July 25, Sinhala prisoners set upon the Tamil detainees, killing 35 of them, with prison guards looking on. Another 18 were killed two days later, although the Tamil detainees barricaded themselves in their cells. Only then did the army restore order, as the Tamil bodies were piled up in the prison yard. A contemporaneous report by Amnesty International cited the testimony of a survivor who said: “We asked these people as to why they came to kill us. To this they replied that they were given arrack by the prison authorities and they were asked to kill all those at the youth offenders ward (where the Tamil prisoners were kept).”¹⁸

On August 6, the Sri Lankan government passed the 6th Amendment, outlawing demands for a separate state and banning the TULF. But the pogroms had only added fuel to the fire of militancy, spurring hundreds of Tamil youth to join the various organizations, and, critically, drawing the interest of India’s Research & Analysis Wing (RAW).

Cooperation and Competition, Then Coercion

Our interviewees who were present in the Jaffna peninsula in the early 1980s describe the pre-1983 militancy as “very underground” with only the Tigers widely known within the Tamil community. But with India’s offer of support after Black July, what one interviewee described as a previously “muddled group of people” known as “the boys” came out into the open.¹⁹

In addition to the LTTE, four other groups became particularly prominent: People’s Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), and TELO. With Indian assistance, all five groups gained in strength and were able to recruit and amass arms. Rivalries and competition between the groups were already present in the early 1980s, but while killings amongst the groups were documented as early as 1984, they did not escalate beyond tit-for-tat assaults.

When the EPRLF, TELO, and EROS joined together to form the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) in April 1984, the LTTE initially declined to join, citing the other groups’ lack of commitment and discipline.²⁰ But under pressure from India, they eventually joined and attended peace talks in 1985 at Thimpu, in Bhutan. The talks collapsed in August 1985 and violence among the groups resumed.

Meanwhile, TELO was experiencing increasing internal discord, leading to the assassination of the leader of one internal faction by another. At the end of April 1986, the TELO and the LTTE each lost fighters in separate battles with the Sri Lankan navy.²¹ Conflict over memorializing the fallen combatants escalated into open warfare between the two groups. The LTTE killed more than 100 fighters including the leader, Sabaratnam.²² TELO imploded and many of its surviving fighters went underground following the LTTE’s announcement of a ban on the group.

Like TELO, PLOTE was also plagued by internal fissures and a lack of arms, although they had plenty of members. In September 1986, the LTTE demanded the transfer of some troops. PLOTE announced soon after that it was suspending its military campaign. In October PLOTE, like TELO, was formally banned by the LTTE.

In November there was a shoot-out involving the EPRLF in Chennai, capital of India's Tamil Nadu province. In response, the Indian government cracked down on the Tamil militant groups, confiscating arms and communications equipment. Both Prabhakaran and the LTTE's chief political strategist, Anton Balasingham, were arrested but then released. Following this episode, the LTTE attacked the EPRLF's training camps and issued notices in both Jaffna and Chennai demanding that all militants must now join the LTTE.

As 1986 ended, TELO, PLOTE, and EPRLF's arms and fighting capacity had all been decimated, and the organizations had been proscribed by the LTTE. The next section examines how and why the LTTE was able to claim for itself the position of sole avatar of the Tamil liberation struggle.

Tracing the LTTE's Emergence as the Dominant Militant Group

Contemporaneous coverage in the Tamil press, as well as the recollections of people present on the Jaffna peninsula during the period indicate that in 1985, the militancy was diverse and both power and popular support were divided among the different organizations. Many of these accounts suggested that in addition to the five main groups, there were upwards of 30 smaller organizations.²³ Much of the reporting at the time referred to "the militants" (or "the boys") as an undifferentiated mass, noting, for instance "the emergence of a parallel administration by the Tamil youth in Jaffna" in 1984.²⁴

By mid-1985, the militants had seriously disrupted the Sri Lankan state's control of the Jaffna peninsula. An article in the *Asian Exchange* reported in June that "[t]he Army only moves around in large convoys by day and fortifies itself within well-protected enclaves at other times."²⁵ With the military hesitant to leave their camps, the militants assumed some governance functions. Those present at the time described the dynamic as "competitive," with the groups vying to extract rents from the population and to convince young Tamils to join up. Contemporaneous accounts suggest that each of the groups mostly kept to "areas where it enjoyed extensive support of the local population,"²⁶ but it appears that there was some degree of cooperation, or at least coordination. One eyewitness recollected a patrol system where each of the LTTE, EPRLF, and TELO took responsibility for guarding one of the roads to the Jaffna Fort.²⁷

By the end of 1986, however, main rival claimants TELO, PLOTE, and EPRLF had been neutralized (while EROS remained critical of the LTTE, they were left alone and eventually absorbed). But the question of exactly when the LTTE can be said to have consolidated its position is not a straightforward one. The Tigers' subsequent history lends them a pall of inevitability, leading analysts to project their supremacy backwards in time.

Both internal and external accounts seem to agree that in early 1987, the LTTE had established itself as "indisputably the predominant Tamil separatist organization."²⁸

As Tamil military analyst and reporter (and one-time PLOTE member) Taraki Sivaram put it, “[b]y January 1987, the LTTE had created a situation on the ground in the North and East where for either India or Sri Lanka, there were only the Tigers to reckon with.”²⁹ And indeed, Indian press reporting consistently referred to the Tigers as the “main” rebel organization, and both Delhi and Colombo treated TULF and the LTTE as the relevant representatives of the Tamil polity.

It appears that this status as sole indispensable group may not have significantly pre-dated December 1986. In September 1986, for instance, the *Tamil Times* devoted equal space to each of the LTTE, PLOTE, EPLRF, and EROS’s responses to government proposals. Likewise, a declassified CIA cable from the same month does not distinguish among the groups when it notes that “some areas are now administered by the insurgents.”³⁰ The contemporaneous coverage, however, reflects their emerging dominance, e.g. *Newsweek’s* August 11, 1986 question to Prabhakaran “Why do you think LTTE has taken the lead among other guerrilla groups?” Similarly, a November 1986 report by Sri Lankan Tamil journalist D.B.S. Jeyaraj in *Frontline* noted governance efforts by PLOTE and EPLRF alongside the Tigers’ more robust program: “The inability of the State to exercise its power effectively has caused a vacuum. That is now being filled as rapidly as possible by the militants, of whom the Tigers lead the field.”³¹

Much of the secondary literature takes the Tigers’ emergence as the dominant group in 1986 as the formalization of a preexisting status quo. Bose, for instance, attributes the Tigers’ success at eliminating their rivals to the fact that they were “always by far the largest, best organised, most disciplined and generally dominant among the Tamil fighting groups.”³² As Thiranagama points out, this narrative of LTTE inevitability reflects the Tigers’ own very conscious myth-making project: “The LTTE has represented Tamil militancy as merely the prelude to themselves in their own teleology, a genealogy that academics have uncritically reproduced.”³³

Notably, these claims about the Tigers’ size directly contradict Sivaram’s assessment that TELO had eight times as many fighters as the LTTE and EPRLF six times as many when each were destroyed in 1986.³⁴ They also contradict the recollections of the Sri Lanka army commander responsible for Jaffna in the 1980s, who told *The Island* newspaper that during his tenure, “TELO had been the dominant group.”³⁵ Finally, they are at odds with what eyewitnesses told us about their impressions of the comparative strength of the five main militant organizations in the mid-1980s. As one interviewee put it, “everyone knew at that time that the LTTE was numerically smaller.”³⁶

However, the characterization of the Tigers as the biggest group was, somewhat puzzlingly, already present in the contemporaneous international press coverage. In its June 19, 1985 article covering the ceasefire, the *New York Times* identified the Tamil Tigers as “the largest insurgent group.”³⁷ Likewise, a March 1984 article in *India Today* providing comprehensive coverage of the groups’ training in Tamil Nadu, describes the LTTE as “the oldest, largest and militarily the most highly organised group.”³⁸

By contrast, accounts from within the Tamil community generally highlight the Tigers’ greater competence as a military organization. An eyewitness to the destruction of TELO in May 1986 described the contrast between the groups, emphasizing the LTTE’s superior planning and ability to move quickly. “Communication” he said, “was

their number 1 priority.”³⁹ TELO, on the other hand, “had no idea what was happening.” He added that although his village was a TELO stronghold, he did not “remember any of them having a walkie-talkie.”⁴⁰

A U.S. State Department cable in early 1987 noted that: “The Tigers run a sophisticated radio communications network between the regional commands and Jaffna, a system which many claim is a primary reason for the LTTE’s centralized coordination, discipline, and effectiveness.”⁴¹ Several of the accounts we read and heard emphasized the relationship between the Tigers’ communications system and its superior internal cohesion. Sivaram notes, for instance, that all of the other groups had tensions between their Tamil Nadu based leadership and their commanders on the island, but that “The only leader who circumvented the problem was Prabhakaran. He had a separate command for each district and handled supplies separately through an efficient communications network.”⁴² Lt. Gen. Sardeshpande of the Indian Peacekeeping Force marveled that the LTTE “had enviable expertise in flexible, innovative, reliable and effective communications systems including codes and ciphers, rarely matched by any other insurgent group the world over.”⁴³

In August 1986, Velupillai Prabhakaran’s response to why the LTTE was emerging as the dominant group was “discipline and order are most important.”⁴⁴ Individuals who were present on the Jaffna peninsula in the mid-1980s recalled the LTTE’s discipline as their most noticeable characteristic, noting for instance that unlike the other groups’ fighters, LTTE members would never smoke in public.⁴⁵ One interviewee posited a link between the LTTE’s discipline and the fact that they were the only group to deliberately control growth, speculating that the group’s notoriously selective recruitment strategy was at least partially responsible for the fact that “the consistency of LTTE behavior never changed.”⁴⁶ The University Teachers for Human Rights, some of the Tigers’ most vocal critics within the Tamil community put a more sinister spin on this characteristic: “one may point to what seems a qualitative difference in outlook between the L.T.T.E. and other groups. The L.T.T.E. men were trained to carry out orders from the top blindly.”⁴⁷

The foregoing suggests that the narrative in the academic literature that the LTTE was always the biggest and strongest group probably does not accurately capture the dynamics of consolidation in this case. It also reveals a larger question: If the LTTE was not dominant before it eliminated its rivals, why did the population tolerate what was, by all accounts, shocking internecine violence?

Toward a Theory

The primary and secondary sources we consulted contain widely divergent views of why the LTTE was able to claim popular support after violently eliminating its rival Tamil militant organizations. But while these accounts are often at odds with one another, reading them together reveals several emergent and interrelated themes regarding the relationship of the Tigers to the population of the Jaffna peninsula in the mid-1980s, having to do with comparative criminality across the groups, the provision of protection, commitment to the nationalist cause, and the relationship to India.

Criminality/Protection

The secondary literature all notes that chaos followed the emergence of the guerrillas into the open in 1983, with the population subjected to robberies, kidnappings, and even extrajudicial killing. It was so bad that the Mothers Front of Jaffna, an organization formed to protest the Sri Lankan army's abuses, took out a newspaper ad appealing to the groups to stop preying upon the population.⁴⁸ In the words of one British military analyst: "They simply took what they wanted from people, openly and arrogantly; 'The Boys need this car' (or whatever the desired object was) became a common expression."⁴⁹ But while these accounts convey a sense of lawlessness that is consistent with the reporting of the era, their attribution of criminality to all the militants equally is not.

As early as 1984, international press coverage noted that the LTTE was providing law and order. An April 1984 *New Statesman* article, whose angle is explicit in its title "Tamils Back the Tigers," described a case in which the LTTE forced payments from a Tamil civil servant who had been "cheating the contract labourers of their wages" and another in which the LTTE "intervened in a Hindu-Muslim clash which the police had failed to stop, by cornering and threatening the Hindus."⁵⁰

International media also reported that the LTTE engaged in overt policing of the other groups' criminal activities, for instance pledging to the population to act against the perpetrators of a large-scale temple robbery.⁵¹ In October 1985, an article in the *Times* quoted a member of one of the militant organizations defending the use of robberies on the grounds that "[j]ungle life is not that easy." It emphasized, however, that "The Tigers are not so careless of the local population's feelings."⁵² Also in this vein, the April 19, 1986 "Diary of Incidents" put out by the Tamil Information and Research Unit noted a newspaper advertisement complaining of a robbery by an "armed gang of youths" and calling on the "good" militants to help recover the stolen items. Famously, after liquidating TELO in May 1986, the LTTE theatrically placed all of the stolen goods recovered from their camps at a busy intersection in Jaffna, for the rightful owners to come and reclaim.

The claim that the Tigers did not engage in petty criminality is borne out by eyewitness accounts.⁵³ In the words of one of our interviewees: "even though people couldn't tell who was doing it, they knew it wasn't the LTTE."⁵⁴ As another interviewee put it: "the LTTE brought order, the other groups brought disorder."⁵⁵

Bose, writing in 1994, makes a strong claim that the other militant organizations' lawlessness "enabled the Tigers... to cruelly and ruthlessly liquidate most of the leadership and rank-and-file of these other elements without any apparent negative political repercussions among the Tamil population at large."⁵⁶ This is in line with the LTTE's own justification for its actions at the time, presented in a statement issued on April 30, 1986 saying the people of Jaffna had been demanding them to act against TELO and their anti-social behavior – so they did.⁵⁷ This thread was picked up in much of the contemporaneous press coverage. A *New York Times* report in August 1986 suggested that the population tacitly approved the LTTE's actions: "Residents of Jaffna, where the Tigers control large parts of the city, say one of the reasons Mr. Prabakaran's organization swept away its opponents was that other guerrilla groups had become involved in petty thievery and general lawlessness, which was discrediting the cause."⁵⁸

It is clear, however, that this read is not uncontested. Unsurprisingly, TELO's remaining leadership strongly contradicted the LTTE's account, accusing them of being jealous of its military successes and of committing atrocities against its members, including burning surrendees alive.⁵⁹ The other groups echoed the condemnation, with EPRLF's spokesperson describing the attack as "ruthless and murderous."⁶⁰ And UTHR, writing in 1988, advanced a very different explanation for the lack of open protest of the LTTE's destruction of TELO:

The people were so terrified, that few found the courage to give shelter to the fugitives. While this unprecedented display was on, people stood mutely at junctions and watched, as persons hardly dead, were doused and burnt. Hardly anyone protested, which is understandable. Some went home saying things such as: "We have produced our own Hitlers."

However, even UTHR's reporting acknowledged the importance local residents placed on the imposition of order: "An aspect of L.T.T.E. dominance that made it acceptable to the general public was that robberies virtually ceased. The poor and the middle classes were left alone."⁶¹

In the words of the Indian Division Commander deployed to Jaffna in 1988: "It had a visible code of conduct so far as the general public was concerned. No other party or group came anywhere near these standards."⁶²

The LTTE's own press outreach at the time argued that the same factors that enabled them to defeat their rivals tactically also brought them greater mass support. In an interview with *The Hindu* published in September 1986, Velupillai Prabhakaran again emphasized his organization's discipline: "When we keep a person in our organization, he is by definition one who fights for the people. If he indulges in action inimical to the interests of the people or in anti-social activities and we support it or put up with it, then be sure that this struggle will lose its way."⁶³

The Tigers did not just offer superior protection from militants within the community. One commentator argued that in 1987 the LTTE were seen as "the only people who gave their lives to protect the Tamils from the Sri Lankan security forces, when... groups like the TULF were safely ensconced in Colombo and Tamil Nadu."⁶⁴ Many commentators have argued that for the local population, this protection was far more important than the groups' political programs. In the words of one of N. Shanmugaratnam's interlocutors in his 1989 account of a trip to Jaffna: "It is the military capacity and heroism of the guerrillas against what the people perceive as the enemy, as the alien, that are critical in this context, not the politics of any group."⁶⁵ Likewise, describing impressions developed during research in 1986–1987, Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam says: "From what I have heard from civilians from Jaffna, the population actually seems to have more faith in the Tigers' ability to protect them than belief in the accusations of the other groups."⁶⁶

Commitment to the Cause/Resistance to India

Other accounts highlighted the Tigers' single-minded commitment to the goal of an independent Tamil Eelam. In the words of Sivaram: "The LTTE is the only organization that still refuses to submit the dream of Tamileelam to the dictates of political and geo-strategic realities. For the LTTE the moral obligation is more important than

political reality.”⁶⁷ Contemporaneous accounts suggest that this dedication was already visible in the mid-1980s. One of the earliest scholarly examinations of the LTTE concluded: “The ultraconservative people of Jaffna support the LTTE because they are the most nationalist of the militant groups.”⁶⁸

Linked to its insistence on independence, the LTTE also stood out at the time for their cautious approach to Indian support. Bose notes that: “The organization made a determined effort to safeguard its independence and prevent its future course of action from being mortgaged to the Indians.”⁶⁹ This was a position the LTTE took pains to publicize to the Tamil people, through multiple Tamil and English language pamphlets and booklets explaining their concerns about India’s motivations.⁷⁰ But some observers read the LTTE’s positioning regarding India very differently. UTHR pointed out that just like the other groups, the Tigers “received arms and training from India” and that Prabhakaran lived there until 1987. They suggested that LTTE was hypocritically using the accusation that other groups had become “agents of India” as a strategy to bolster its “claims of exclusiveness.”⁷¹

Other accounts suggest that the LTTE’s public anti-India stance may have been due in part to irritation at India’s support to their rival organizations following Black July. In the words of one chronicler, a furious Prabhakaran “felt that India was activating the dormant groups. TELO had not conducted any military operation since April 1981. EROS was a mere talking shop.”⁷² Bose suggests skepticism about India’s intentions was warranted, saying that New Delhi “desired that the bulk of Indian covert assistance should not go to the fiercely self-willed and independent-minded Tigers, but to some more pliable entity, which could then be used to undermine Tiger dominance of the Tamil armed struggle, and prevent the LTTE from getting too big for its boots.”⁷³

People who were present on the Jaffna peninsula in the mid-1980s recalled that TELO went out of its way to emphasize its connections to India. “If you joined TELO at that time” one said, “you pretty much got shipped to India the next morning.”⁷⁴ As one scholar explained, “The members of TELO have been called ‘India’s little soldiers’ because India not only openly funded, trained and supplied TELO with weapons, but also because TELO seemed to bow to the Indian view of the problem and to push the Indian option in negotiations.”⁷⁵

Sivaram notes that at the time, the relationship to India was an extremely salient point of controversy, and a “fissure in the affairs of the Tamil movement.” He explains: “There was serious concern about the wisdom of having come to India in the first place and about the disproportionate importance of the rearbase among some quarters.”⁷⁶

The LTTE maintained from the outset that Indian intervention “was not in the interest of the Eelam Tamils” but instead reflected India’s geopolitical interests. They justified their decision to accept arms and training from India in the early 80s on the grounds that if they did not, the other groups would destroy them and, ultimately, the liberation movement.⁷⁷ Indeed, the *Saturday Review* reported at the time of the attack on TELO: “The LTTE strike was a preemptive move, it is reported – a warning to India that they can help in resolving Sri Lanka’s ethnic crisis but that it cannot dictate terms.”⁷⁸ Defending the LTTE’s actions to *Asiaweek* in late 1986, Jaffna commander Kittu argued that: “TELO was being influenced and virtually controlled by

outsiders” and that following TELO’s destruction, EPRLF then “came under the influence of the same people who controlled TELO.”⁷⁹

Constructing Legitimacy?

At several points during the research process, we encountered a version of a story N. Shanmugaratnam tells about the assassination of a prominent Tamil civil servant:

When the news of his death came out, the first reaction of many people was that the EPRLF must have been behind it. People were angered about the murder of “a golden person like the GA [Government Agent].” But when the LTTE claimed responsibility for the killing, the same people who had called Punchalingam “a golden person” changed their tune, and now they started wondering, “Perhaps he did something wrong.”⁸⁰

We recount this anecdote here because we think it illuminates a critical factor driving the LTTE’s ability to eliminate its competitor organizations: namely, that the population afforded to the Tigers a greater license to use violence within the Tamil community than it did the other groups. The question of why the population would tolerate brutal violence against fellow Tamil militants implicates, but does not precisely engage, the political science literature on rebel violence against civilians, which suggests, alternately, that violence against civilian varies with resource endowments,⁸¹ constituencies,⁸² capabilities,⁸³ or cohesion.⁸⁴ But these accounts are generally concerned with opportunistic violence and the failure to uphold order within their territory, whereas we read the evidence presented in the preceding pages to suggest that the population largely accepted the Tigers’ portrayal of its within-community violence as *order-upholding*. One scholar of the period contended that the LTTE’s approach created something like a “social contract” in which, “[i]n return for the moral and material support from the population, the Tigers claim they provide protection against army attacks, they keep the army in the barracks and revenge the killings of civilians.”⁸⁵

The rebel governance literature highlights that security structures are frequently the first institutions that rebels establish because “the provision of security to a war-torn population is the most effective way to obtain popular support and, consequently, increase the chances of survival in the medium-to-long term.”⁸⁶ And indeed, they allow “an insurgency to demonstrate its relative power to civilians, in addition to laying claim to a key component of Weberian sovereignty, that is, the monopoly over the use of violence within a specific territory.”⁸⁷ LTTE propaganda consciously and consistently worked to portray the organization as a formal military structure and the only legitimate purveyor of violence on behalf of the Tamil nation. This choice reflected both the competitive state-building project vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan state and attempts to outcompete the other militant groups. In service of this end, the group was extremely protective of its brand, going so far as to repeatedly warn journalists and officials not to refer to members of the other groups as “Tigers.” In a May 1984 press release, they chided the Tamil Nadu press: “A great deal of confusion is created when the name of our liberation movement is indiscriminately used by the local South Indian press to describe the activities of other liberation groups who are structurally different from the Tigers.”⁸⁸

Dating back to 1978, all LTTE materials for public release used the Tiger logo, and by the mid-1980s a consistent aesthetic is observable, promoting an image of LTTE fighters as disciplined, committed defenders of the Tamil nation. Journalists visiting the northeast in the early 1980s noted the ubiquity of the LTTE's printed materials. As one observed in 1984, "L.T.T.E.'s wall-posters and pamphlets are to be found in towns and even small villages all over the north and east."⁸⁹ By the mid to late 1980s, the LTTE was producing at least six periodicals, both Tamil and English, aimed at Tamils at home and in the diaspora. These increasingly featured staged photographs of Velupillai Prabhakaran in combat fatigues, often holding an assault rifle or pointing a pistol, emphasizing his role as a military leader.

Some of the accounts we read and heard also highlighted other governance efforts. But because the LTTE went on to administer a sophisticated quasi-state (and indeed had already assumed state-like authority in the Jaffna peninsula in the early 1990s), it is difficult to confidently analyze the extent of its governance activities relative to the other groups in the mid-1980s. Already in 1989, scholars were observing that the LTTE "had organized public life in Jaffna along its own lines, running ammunition factories, nurse[y] [sic] schools, even a rudimentary military academy" and concluding that the other militant organizations had "less clear ideas about the political and social structure of the future Eelam."⁹⁰ However, because we did not find this to be a consistent theme of the accounts from 1984 to 1986, we do not make the argument here that the relative acceptability of LTTE violence derived from the group's provision of governance beyond policing during the period.

We do note, however, that while much of the secondary literature refers to all of the militant groups extracting taxes from the population, our read of the primary sources and our interviews suggests that there was a distinction in approach to taxation in the mid-1980s. As one interviewee explained, the LTTE taxed businesses based on their revenues, in a manner that was "recurring and methodical." His recollection was that the other groups extracted in a one-off fashion and did not remember recurring taxes imposed by any other militant groups.⁹¹ Scholars of rebel governance have emphasized the importance of routinization of taxation and observed that "when implemented consistently, responsibly, and non-arbitrarily" taxation "attaches a fundamental dimension of predictability and accountability to the group's rule and reinforces the image of the group as legitimate ruler."⁹²

The trajectory we describe here is somewhat at odds with accounts in the literature on rebel rule, which, as Rebecca Tapscott and Eliza Urwin put it, tend to "trace a progression" from arbitrary violence and extraction to the consolidation of institutional of institutional orders.⁹³ From its earliest days the LTTE positioned itself as the Tamil nation's military and explicitly linked regularized taxation with defense of the nation. A July 1984 statement by Prabhakaran, released in Tamil and English, announced the need for a national defense project, saying: "Such a civil defence program necessitates enormous funds. In view of this national emergency we have organized a national defence fund. This fund will be collected in Tamil Eelam and abroad. Representatives of our movement will approach the Tamil public with proper identity cards issued by us."⁹⁴

Legitimacy is a multivalent and elusive concept. As James Worrall explains, "Legitimacy is generally generated with reference to local norms, identities and realities

which resonate with target populations ... pragmatic forms of legitimacy are based on things such as the provision of services, protection or even a willingness to share power, while moral legitimacy is founded on narratives of goodness, compatibility with existing norms and moral codes, as well as those which are explicitly referenced against religion or ethnicity.⁹⁵ Internal critics of the LTTE offer a very thin characterization, arguing that the Tigers' "legitimacy rested on the appeal of Tamil chauvinism and fear of the Sri Lankan army,"⁹⁶ while adherents of the organization ground the groups' legitimacy in its faithfulness to the aspirations of the Tamil nation. Both accounts, however, are consistent with an argument that the population granted to the Tigers a greater license to use violence than the other groups.

Conclusion

Between April and November 1986, the LTTE used violence and the threat of violence to coercively eliminate their rival Tamil militant groups. The social science literature has typically portrayed this trajectory as a foregone conclusion, stating that the LTTE was always the largest and most powerful of the groups. As we outline above, this is a misconception and leaves behind it a question: If the LTTE did not have superior manpower or arms to its rivals, and more families in the community would have been associated with the other groups, why was it able to defeat them and why was it able to use this kind of violence internally with little repercussion? We have argued here that the answer lies in a relationship to the community that is consistent with the LTTE's very deliberate narrativizing of itself as the Tamil nation's military. Whether because the Tigers' ideological position adhered more closely to the Tamil nation, or because they were more credible and confidence-inspiring as a military organization, or because of the terms of a straightforward protection racket, much of the population perceived the LTTE as the most legitimate users of violence among the militants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

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6. See, e.g., Ian S. Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (1996): 605–18.

7. Nimmi Gowrinathan and Kate Cronin-Furman, *The Forever Victims? Tamil Women in Post-War Sri Lanka* (New York: Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership, 2015).
8. All the major Tamil militant organizations regularly published statements in English and Tamil throughout the period in question. Many, particularly the LTTE, had a sophisticated communications strategy and a global distribution network, which spread their messages across the diaspora. The movements also published their own newspapers, news bulletins and magazines, which were also distributed through these networks. On top of that, unaffiliated newspapers and magazines were publishing in Sri Lanka and the diaspora at the time, including some based in the North-East, both in Tamil and English. We reviewed dozens of English and Tamil language movement publications, with a focus on those published between 1984 and 1987, as well as every issue of the English-language monthly (London-based) *Tamil Times* published between 1983 and 1987, and every issue of the English-language weekly (Jaffna-based) *Saturday Review* published in 1985 and 1986. We (Mario) also reviewed the contemporaneous coverage of the events we describe in the following Tamil language papers: *Eela Nadu*, *Eela Murasu*, *Saranikar*, *Suthanthiran* and the *Uthayan*.
9. In this we are doing something similar to what Roth & Mehta describe in “The Rashomon Effect: Combining Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches in the Analysis of Contested Events,” although we depart from their approach in that we are explicitly using the contradictions between accounts to generate theory.
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19. Author Interview, June 2020.
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28. US Cable 87COLOMBO1041_a (February 12, 1987)
29. *TamilNet*, “Tigers two pronged strategy-Taraki, 1989”, November 25, 2005, <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=16408>. (Last accessed December 15, 2021)
30. Directorate of Intelligence, “Sri Lanka: The Growing Insurgency,” NESA 86-10036, September 1986.

31. D. B. S. Jeyaraj, "Tamil Eelam – Illusions of Indian Help Dispelled," *Frontline*, November 15–28, 1986.
32. Sumantra Bose, *States, Nations, Sovereignty: Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), 88.
33. Thiraganama, *In My Mother's House*, 183. For an example of what she describes see, e.g., "The militancy of the LTTE along with a couple of other groups was a reaction to the inability of the Sri Lankan state to address the political demands of the minority Tamils" (Gerharz in Hettige & Gerharz 2015).
34. Note O'Ballance's claim that "the EPRLF could probably field about 400 guerrillas", 67.
35. *The Island*, "Ex Jaffna Commander speaks out", March 10, 2011.
36. Author Interview, June 2020.
37. *New York Times*, "Sri Lanka and Rebels Announce a Cease-Fire", June 16, 1985.
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39. This claim is borne out by the hunger strike VP initiated in response to India's confiscation of the LTTE's wireless sets in late 1986.
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50. Wilson, Amrit. "Tamils Back the Tigers." *The New Statesman*, April 27, 1984.
51. *The Times*, "Tamil guerillas armed to teeth but out of step on political tactics," October 29, 1985, 10.
52. *Ibid.*; *The Times*, "Army's Pull-Back Gives Tamil Gangs Free Hand," October 25, 1985, 10.
53. It is worth noting as well that accounts of the militants' behavior in Tamil Nadu also suggest that the Tigers refrained from abusing the population, e.g., "The PLOTE and TELO were involved in kidnapping well-to-do Tamils for ransom and the EPRLF exhorted money by adopting threats and intimidation" (KTR 2002, Ch. 33).
54. Author Interview, June 2020.
55. Author Interview, July 2020.
56. Bose, *States, Nations, and Sovereignty*, 88.
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