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Life after Prabhakaran

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In one instance of a quiet chat with Velupillai Prabhakaran, I asked him for his vision of a settlement with the Sri Lankan state. His face imperturbable and his pupils fixing me in an unblinking stare, he answered in polite Tamil that a settlement was out of the question and that Eelam was not a negotiable idea. The inflexible man — a consummate guerrilla tactician, and an inspiring leader to his cadres — showed till the end his limited grasp of strategic purpose. In the process, he assassinated not just foes, but friends and well wishers, loyal colleagues, moderate Tamils and innumerable innocents. That the good of the Tamil people can be obtained within the Sri Lankan state remained beyond his mindset.

The success of Sri Lanka's military in liberating the entire territory of LTTE has been a slow and long process. The late Lakshman Kadirgamar, as foreign minister, had worked to get the LTTE declared a terrorist organisation by the international community. This led to the freezing of its accounts and an end to its operations from foreign soils. The building of a national consensus by President Rajapakse on full-scale military operations had led to 90 per cent public support in the country. The creation of the Eastern Province under a Tamil leader by masterminding a split in the LTTE top leadership had reduced Prabhakaran's capacities by half. The multi-pronged military offensive to seize back territory from the LTTE was a long and costly strategy but forced Prabhakaran into conventional defence. The LTTE's strong card of terror attacks began to lose momentum and impact.

Colombo's strategy of regaining territory and denying the LTTE the population bases forced Prabhakaran to use his artillery and his pitiful "air force" of a couple of small aircraft in symbolic acts of defiance. The much vaunted Tiger Navy comprising speed boats had been confined to shallow water lagoons and coastal water. The LTTE could never have matched the Sri Lankan military backed by the state's entire capacity to continue the war to the end. The Sri Lankan military's extensive use of modern electronic and surveillance resources could not be matched by the hopelessly out-of-date technology of the LTTE. Prabhakaran sought to negotiate and re-start peace talks. He had burnt those bridges a long time ago by walking out of the internationally assisted peace process. The Tamil diaspora abroad, dispirited by Prabhakaran's intransigence and inability to turn the peace process to gain a significant political dividend, could do no more than demonstrate in Western capitals before an uncaring global opinion.

As the military pincers closed in on him, Prabhakaran could have accepted the offer to lay down arms, then negotiate an outcome, stretch out the talks, work the global Tamil opinion and exploit the Indian Tamil sympathy to his advantage. He was, simply put, incapable of such thinking. This led to holding the Tamil population as hostage for his safety, with untold suffering to hundreds of thousands of people for whose well-being he had waged the three-decade-long campaign.

India and Sri Lanka both need to look beyond the immediate respective sense of their relief and jubilation. Flawed policies had led to a situation where a guerrilla leader had forced the Sri Lankan state on the back foot and forced it to negotiate under international guidance, which did no credit to its chauvinist leadership of the times. The Indian role in Sri Lanka — a combination of constructiveness, ambiguity and responsiveness to local political considerations — was far from perfect. It is time for the

leadership of the two nations to reaffirm their commitment to secular ideals and begin the process of repairing the damage to the two countries' political and social cohesion.

Sri Lanka needs to energetically demonstrate its capacity and will to reconstruction and resettlement of the war-ravaged economy of the Northern Province. More than that, Colombo must speedily put into effect all that President Rajapakse has promised in terms of devolution of powers. He has massive public support and is well set to seek a re-election to office. His place in history will be ensured by being able to bring lasting peace to his country through the political and constitutional measures that are obvious to him. It will also be necessary for him to look again at the geo-political equations he wishes to build for Sri Lanka in terms of relations with regional and major powers. What the future of Sri Lanka's large and powerful military will be after peace has been won is a question that will be asked and will affect his country's polity.

India, with a government that will be politically stable for its five-year term, will need to encourage and assist Colombo in attaining its peace dividend from the military victory so painfully gained. The challenge for the political leadership in Tamil Nadu will be no less great. They will be expected to temper their concern for Sri Lanka's Tamils with far greater understanding of issues involved in state-building and nation-making. India and Sri Lanka will both have to traverse their future emotional and political terrains by placing their economic future at a higher level than the chauvinistic ground covered in the past.

*The writer, a former director-general of military operations, is director of the Delhi Policy Group
express@expressindia.com*