

# THE NATIONALIST SECESSIONIST GUERRILLA PHENOMENON

## A REJOINDER

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**R**ight from the outset, Adrian Wijemannes conceptualisation of nationalism (*Pravada* vol. 5, no.9) is problematic and flawed primarily because it supports a polemical line of argumentation, rather than one based on historical and contextual realities. Furthermore, it is drawn primarily from his understanding of the Sri Lankan context, even though he feigns to discuss the issue from a wide array of case studies contrived to support his point of view.

And upon closer examination of Wijemanne's analysis in the Sri Lankan context, I am struck by his rather one-sided treatment of Tamil paramilitary separatist-nationalism (what he terms as "the nationalist secessionist guerrilla phenomenon"). In fact, he makes no mention of the bitter internal contradictions within the Tamil polity or the phenomenon of Tamil paramilitary collaborationist-nationalisms - which largely support the Government of Sri Lanka's position of "jaw-jaw, war-war", despite the mounting casualties and periodic low-morale, given that the alternative would be annihilation. Nor does he touch upon the double-edged character of nationalism, which binds those who unleash the war-option to the populist all or nothing *combat mode* (see de Silva 1995, 1998).

One also clearly understands from reading Wijemanne's article, that he has never been in actual combat or visited the killing fields of Sri Lanka, which is a serious drawback on his part, as his intervention is aimed at providing "a deeper, more rational, more percipient understanding of both nationalism and nationalist secessionist guerrillas", as opposed to war and its attendant ruin.

I also find that the treatment of the -common characteristics, "[I]n every theatre of secessionist guerrilla activity" is far too generalised and at times even erroneous. And in fact, it is only by dealing with specificities and particularities *at all levels* - from localised ground situations to macro contexts at the national, regional and international levels - can analysts genuinely hope to provide cogent and helpful advice to policy-makers.

Let us now examine the six -common characteristics laid out by Wijemanne.

### **A Tenacity Against Massive Odds (which defies conventional explanation)**

**I**t is true that many conventional military analysts have and continue to make the cardinal mistake of believing in the logic of short-term pushover military campaigns. More often than not, they end in failure due to over-confidence, lack of professionalism, logistical overload and a lack of adequate understanding of

the *organisational character/structure and logistical strengths* of oppositional forces. The latter point is key to understanding the resilience of the Tamil paramilitary challenge mounted and sustained by the separatist-nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, the converse is also true and it is one of the factors, among others like familiarity of cultural-national and topographical terrain by the Government of Sri Lanka's regular and irregular forces, which led to the swift ("short duration" to use Wijemannes words) crushing of the ultra-nationalist insurrection launched by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP or People's Liberation Front) from 1987-1991. This is an undeniable fact, which nullifies Wijemanne's claim, that "[t]here is no theatre of such conflict [nationalist guerrilla wars on the guerrillas home ground] where the conventional wisdom has been otherwise. And adding the semantic category of -separatist here, which does not fit the JVP case, does not bring about a profound change to the veracity of this point.

On the other hand, the professional and highly-trained General Staff of many of today's elite counter-insurgency forces understand fully well the limitations of short-term pushover military campaigns in the face of well organised and logistically self-reliant oppositional forces. There may be exceptions to this rule and that has more to do with inadequate Special Forces training of the General Staff in question and the result of populist meddling by ill-advised politicians in the carrying out of military campaigns. The failure of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) campaign against the LTTE in Sri Lanka is a good case in point.

Coming back to Wijemanne's article, I find that his -statistical glance at the situation in Northern Ireland is far too simplistic and arithmetical, to say the least. It also illustrates his lack of understanding of the context within which the urban-based campaign of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was conducted against British and Loyalist forces. Not to mention the cumulative effect of long-term behind the scenes efforts by policy advisers, as well as ground realities and the popular will of the peoples of Northern Ireland - which helped create the conditions for peace, however uneasy it may appear at present.

Although the debacle of Vietnam haunts the US military establishment even today, one must not forget that despite all the tremendous sacrifices made by the nationalist-communists in Vietnam, it could not have been sustained to such effect had not Chairman Mao Tse Tung's Peoples Republic of China provided the kind of logistical assistance that was needed during that momentous phase of world history.

I would not fault Wijemanne when he criticises J.R. Jayewardene's National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali - whose mandate to wipe out the Tamil rebellion through a short-term pushover military campaign, combined with the changing of demographic patterns, was ill-conceived. And which in fact laid the foundations for the protracted positional and guerrilla warfare we see in the north-central, northern and north-eastern provinces - with little or noterritorial gains in absolute terms to either of the two protagonist forces, apart from the unnecessary shedding of the blood of rural peasant youth and children. Wijemanne's arithmetical comparison with Northern Ireland is hardly helpful in relation to this point, apart from its polemical value.

Once again, Wijemanne displays a lack of in-depth understanding of both the Eritrean and Burmese (Myanmar) case studies and simply adds them as window dressing, which also does not add any substance to his argument. The defeat of the Ethiopian state, which had at one time the strongest army in Sub-Saharan Africa is a long and convoluted tale. It had more to do with the vagaries of the Cold War, inter-regional warfare and intra-national warfare between the Military regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (called the *Derg*) and the multiplicity of nationalist (communist) forces - of which the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) were the main actors - than the single-handed effort of the EPLF as Wijemanne suggests. The TPLF under Meles Zenawi, later created the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Force (EPRDF), which eventually captured state power in Ethiopia, with some additional support of a couple of elite infantry and armoured divisions of the EPLF.

And Wijemanne's fleeting reference to an "identical conflict in its 50th year" in Myanmar (Burma) is quite erroneous and shows that he does not have the slightest understanding of this particular case study. While armed conflicts have meandered the course of recent Burmese history, the underlying logic of many of these have had a lot to do with regional fiefdoms run by warlords controlling the lucrative heroin, timber and precious stones black markets, than vigorous and sustained separatist-nationalist campaigns, despite the rhetoric of the Karen and other ethnic, tribal and political groupings. Moreover, the dry-season military offensives of recent years mounted by the regime in Rangoon (Yangon) have paid dividends on the ground with the capture of swathes of territory, followed by arrangements of "mutual accommodation".

Having said all of the above, it is clear that Wijemanne's standards are flawed and as a result, his analogy does not hold water under scrutiny. However, this does not preclude the possibility of a long-drawn and protracted war with the separatist-nationalist paramilitaries of the LTTE, but this has little to do with Wijemanne's assertion that it is due to the "profound ignorance of the nature and history of nationalist, secessionist warfare", given his own ignorance of wider contexts. Rather, it has more to do with the LTTE's organisational character/structure and logistical strengths, Velupillai Prabhakaran's idiosyncrasies and insistence on the all or nothing option, and the strategic and tactical failures of successive governments of Sri Lanka in out-manoeuving the LTTE militarily and/or politico-economically.

I will not belabour previously argued points by criticising Wijemanne's knowledge and choice of examples. However, in passing, it should be noted that there are rather striking dissimilarities between the largely urban campaigns of the IRA and the rural-based warfare of the LTTE, as well as the historical conditions surrounding the geopolitics of the time, which led to the establishment of the Republic of Ireland, which are quite unrelated to those concerning the more contemporaneous efforts of the LTTE.

Generalised statements such as "[c]onflicts with nationalist, secessionist guerillas (sic) are extremely long-lasting" are unhelpful, as each context is different and because specificities demand closer scrutiny. And it is quite erroneous to claim that, "[t]hroughout the long period of the conflict the state opposed to the guerillas (sic) has never been able to comprehend how the guerillas (sic) managed to keep going" and had Wijemanne some idea of first-hand operational procedures, he would not make such a wild claim. Furthermore, his tendency to homogenise "The State" and "The Guerrillas" into two oppositional blocs obscures from analysis the multiplicity of underlying interest groups and agents, and presents readers with what is apparent from journalistic or populist points of view.

While it is a truism that "[n]ationalist secessionist guerillas (sic) are not states, and consequently, do not have the multifarious responsibilities of states" it would be wrong to surmise that "[t]heir sole objective is warfare conducted by mostly unpaid and dedicated volunteers". If I were to split hairs with Wijemanne, I would argue that cadres of organisations like the LTTE either have access to substantial resources gathered by their organisation or have been known to pay salaries on occasion (in keeping with the image of a standing army), and that not in all cases are the cadres *dedicated volunteers* considering that there is a device known as press-ganging. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the LTTE does gain strength from operating in the *combat mode*. It is their greatest strength and weakness, as they are successful while operating within the dictates of such a militarised context, but are woefully inept or even afraid in operating in a demilitarised atmosphere - a phenomenon which has put paid to many an attempt at making a long-term peace agreement stick. Having said this, I doubt the veracity of Wijemanne's claim that "[t]he immense sacrifices of personnel by guerillas (sic) in battle are a crucial factor in inspiring ready replenishments. This is a basic and fundamental factor in every theatre of such conflict", on the grounds that combatants from different cultures and ideological standpoints react differently in the face of large-scale casualties, not to mention that individuals are never known to react uniformly in such situations, despite all the training and indoctrination they might have had. Moreover, as most combatants in Sri Lanka would confirm, actual combat and large-scale casualties invariably involve a combination of fear and adrenaline rush, not to mention feelings such as relief, hate, disgust, sadness and sense of loss in the aftermath of a particularly brutal engagement and is therefore hardly a 'crucial factor' for inspiring ready replenishments. And while rebels might be more motivated in comparison to paid government soldiers, it is quite wrong for Wijemanne to completely negate these very human feelings among cadres of a guerrilla or paramilitary organisation, as in fact they are neither robots nor supermen or superwomen, as myth and rumour might dictate. And while the

"Top Brass" of many unsuccessful military campaigns can be castigated for ineptitude, crass optimism, unprofessionalism, corruption and worse, many of the better-trained and funded military establishments do not suffer from the kind of amnesia Wijemanne accuses all General Staff of possessing, unless he had a particular set of Generals in mind.

And while theoretically the legislature is placed above that of the military in most democracies, civilian governments also need to upgrade their professional capabilities - i.e. to have among other talents, the quality and the political will to exercise independent judgment - not only for the purpose of waging war and to avoid being "the lackeys of their military servants and let themselves be railroaded to ruin", but also to plan for post-conflict futures.

### **A Refusal to compromise on their *raison d'etre***

I would contest Wijemanne's claim, that "[i]t is not lightly or wantonly that people take up arms against their state". More often than not rebels do not fully weigh the pros and cons of waging what has the potential of turning into a destructive war or insurrection. And quite often, the rashness of youth and ill-conceived, romantic notions of revolutionary societal change fuels the taking up of arms against the state. It is with hindsight and more measured and experienced judgement that one can review such processes and it is beneficial if one has had the added advantage of going through such a process, an experience that is not part of Wijemanne's curriculum vitae. And while it might be true that armed rebellion "happens when they [rebels] can see no other course of action", probably due to limited horizons on the part of the rebel leadership and/or the lack of socio-political and cultural space due to dictatorial state policies. However, I doubt that anyone could actually fathom the depths of privation and blood sacrifice involved in protracted warfare, unless and until he/she has tasted and experienced the bitter fruits of armed combat. And it is only once such experience is felt that the illusions of a quick and easy victory fade away to be replaced by the folly of 'do or die' or -all or nothing positions - which only those without an ethical and moral standpoint vis-a-vis the sanctity of human life can adhere to and promote over the long-term. And while the emotive fervour of ideologically motivated armed struggle continue to be fanned by spectacular military actions, it can only be sustained and maintained over the long-term when the leadership or leader achieves near God-like status, as Prabhakaran has succeeded in obtaining in the eyes of a youthful following and when the symbolic terrain is captured through the construction of a martyrology, where self-sacrifice and military valour/heroism become part of the sacred. Whether such a manifestation can be satiated through the fulfillment of the demands of the LTTE's separatist-nationalist objectives is open to speculation, given the fractured history of the Tamil polity and the revenge versus counter-revenge killings associated with the internecine warfare between rival Tamil paramilitary organisations - where the leader of a newly independent, one-party Tamil Eelam would run the very real risk of assassination, much like the fate of Sheik Mujibur Rahman the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Furthermore, if India and Pakistan are any example to go by, partitioning would not solve Sri Lankas troubles, it would only add to them in a more structured and long-term manner.

Rather than it being a question of 'The state' being unable "to understand the motivation of nationalist secessionist guerillas (sic)", I also find that the dichotomy constructed by Wijemanne between the logic of state domination and oppositional -nationalist guerrillas is too exaggerated - in the sense that at the end of the day the bone of contention between these forces is the control over power and resources. And in fact, today's LTTE is the *de facto status quo* within the Tamil polity, a point ignored by Wijemanne. I also wonder about Wijemanne's credentials to comment on what he terms as "the deepest roots of human psychology". Having said this, I agree with his point that "demonization" is invariably the easier option in conflict situations - as opposed to constructive engagement at the strategic and tactical levels, however difficult or frustrating can the circumstances be.

Whether 'nationalism' can be bought off by constitutional or other palliatives (or "concessions" in Wijemanne's opinion) can only be decided through praxis and in fact, it differs from context to context and therefore it is fair to say that no situation remains constant and unchanging over the long-term. And similarly, whether such palliatives promote the project of separatism is also open to debate and can be determined only by trial and error, and not through hesitance and inaction. Recent moves made in the United Kingdom are an interesting case in point here, particularly with regard to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Idle speculation while remaining inactive in practice is unproductive to say the least and better consigned to the realm of armchair critics. And while nationalist forces in India and Ceylon did play a significant role (more so in India than Ceylon) in bringing about an end to British imperial rule, the devastating and debilitating impact of the Second World War also played a major role in this event, a point overlooked by Wijemanne.

Whatever the demerits of satisfying the aspirations of the moderate Tamil polity, who despite being unheard of publicly - with the exception of Tamil collaborationist-nationalists of the paramilitary variant - there is a legislative obligation and ethical responsibility to grant them equal rights as citizens of Sri Lanka. That is, irrespective of whether they be considered 'traitors' or not by the separatist-nationalist paramilitaries of the LTTE. Nevertheless, I do concede that such legalistic palliatives are insufficient to win over the silent majority, since lip service alone has a limited shelf life and novelty value. Constitutional reform must be matched by tangible change on the ground, which can be an illustration of the Government of Sri Lankas good faith. And there is none better project to undertake than the case of the refugees, particularly those of the north-central province. Successive Governments of Sri Lanka have looked a gift horse in the mouth and have done nothing constructive about it. If there is a qualitative sea change in the living conditions and general environment of the periodic waves of refugees in the Wannu sector (some of whom have been in camps for a decade and more), by at least two fold or three fold, there will be a marked improvement in the Government of Sri Lanka's relations with the Tamil polity both at home and abroad - over and above the benefits of constitutional reform. And such good relations cannot be easily disrupted by the LTTE, unless it is willing to brand sizeable sections of the Tamil people as 'traitors' and meet out its brand of justice accordingly -

which would in turn entail the reaping of the fruits of such a course of action.

A course of action such as the one suggested above is far more constructive, than a simplistic argument based on the intransigence of separatist-nationalist organisations such as the LTTE from its professed objectives. And if there are any lessons to be learned from contexts such as the situation in Northern Ireland, it is that organisations like the IRA and Protestant paramilitaries had to change tack in the face of popular disfavour, which built up slowly but surely over the long-term, given the right conditions created by crimes against humanity, which was nurtured by all those behind the scenes policy advisers and savvy politicians from the side of both the British and Irish governments.

### **An Ability to Re-equip Themselves Over And Over Again From Their Adversary's Military Equipment**

**O**n this topic, there is little to fault Wijemanne's argumentation, and the logistical strength and prowess of the LTTE and its Sea Tigers has been the backbone of its military campaign thus far. And the lack of capacity to deal with this problem by the Sri Lankan Naval Forces is a ground reality. The logistical strength of the LTTE is further compounded by the capture of military hardware from units of the Government of Sri Lanka's armed services.

### **An Ability to Suffer Losses**

**C**onventional wisdom among the General Command of professional military forces has changed somewhat from the time of Dien Bien Phu and the campaigns mounted by nationalist-communists of the Vietminh and later the Vietcong against theoretically superior high-technology using American forces. However in terms of numbers, the statistic of 1.25 million combat-related deaths have not taken place in the battlefields of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, when comparing such figures, one has always to measure it in proportion to the populations caught up in such warfare. Therefore, while not negating the capability of the LTTE to inflict material, symbolic and psychological losses to the Government of Sri Lanka's Armed Services, it also does suffer from the high casualty rates of the recent past and needs to mobilise its resources effectively in order to recuperate. And as noted previously, over-generalisation continues to be an unhelpful outcome of Wijemanne's analysis. Furthermore, it is *not* a foregone conclusion, that the LTTE would not eventually enter into a long-term peace agreement and all those engaged in bringing the war in Sri Lanka to an end should not be disheartened by Wijemanne's primarily negative pronouncements.

### **An Ability to Survive (with the active support of only a relatively small proportion of their nation)**

**W**hile a separatist-nationalist military campaign against the state may be "a military response of last resort to the failure of a civil polity" it does not always stay that way. And in the case of the LTTE, warfare has become a means of perpetuating the

organisations own existence as opposed to that of the people it professes to represent. This is a fact illustrated by the socio-political environment surrounding each of the 5 opportunities that were open for a negotiated settlement to the Tamil national question in Sri Lanka - which were squandered in large part by the LTTE's diffidence in operating in a demilitarised context and the lack of good faith between the negotiating parties. These factors combined with the disunity and disharmony of the parties represented in the Sri Lankan parliament, which are unable to present a cohesive and united front during negotiations which is a prerequisite for successful negotiations vis-a-vis the LTTE - has been and continues to be a recipe for failure.

Fear and admiration are two keys to the LTTE's relations with the Tamil peoples. And therefore, an electoral barometer does not provide an accurate picture of support or the lack of support for an organisation like the LTTE. However, as genuine public opinion is stifled as a result of these two key motivating factors, they enable the LTTE to remain in operation without accountability to the very polity it purportedly represents. And as for Wijemanne's polemic about "the delusion [on the part of the Government of Sri Lanka] that guerilla (sic) movements for national liberation must fail for lack of support from their own people" - it remains very much a contrived argument, which reflects little of the understanding of the current Sri Lankan imbroglio that many contemporary Sinhalese politicians possess (despite whatever they might say at a populist level).

### **The Ability to Outlast the State in a Long War of Attrition**

**O**f all the examples presented by Wijemanne, it is only the Eritrean war of independence that fits his claim, that "[G]uerilla (sic) wars of secession are extremely long-lasting, their duration being measured more properly in decades rather than in years". While some commentators note that the War of Irish Independence lasted sporadically for 300 years, this hypothesis is more of a case of reconstructing historical events to support more recent arguments (and politics), a phenomenon not unrelated to points of view expounded in Sri Lanka by politicians playing the game of electoral musical chairs. And as pointed out at the beginning of this review article, the Myanmar example is quite erroneous, as the realities of this case do not conform to Wijemanne's claim.

Furthermore, Wijemanne states that -the guerillas (sic) do "not seek outright military victory recognising at the very outset the impossibility of attaining it". This point is debatable when examining the tactics of the LTTE, where the current state of impasse and the existing war of attrition may be the result of accident rather than design. And more often than not, once unleashed, processes of armed combat and political violence have a dynamic of their own, which agents of political violence are hard put to control or redesign.

### **Conclusion**

**I**n hindsight one can fully concur with Wijemanne's assertion that "[n]ationalism need not necessarily produce nationalist secessionist guerillas (sic) if a rational and humane accom-

modation with it is made in good time". This is similar to the position made by advocates of the concept of the *Prevention of Conflict*, which is all well and good, but it is not helpful in coping or managing with the short-term vagaries of existing conflicts and civil wars. For this purpose, the well meaning analysis of individuals like Wijemanne are useful insofar as they stimulate and encourage debate and reassessment of existing policies. Critical analysis, *which is acted upon by the executive*, coupled with a genuine search for viable alternatives by those actors engaged with both tactical and strategic perspectives, can eventually bring an end to what has become an unnecessary waste of resources, both human and material - which can be easily diverted towards social development if there were to be a settlement. And rather than wallowing in pessimism, self-doubt and backbiting, it should be kept in mind that all

wars do end for a variety of historical and existential reasons. And in Sri Lanka the task at hand is to cope or muddle through with the short-term problems of warfare, while building a genuine consensus between all the parties represented in parliament, which is an absolute prerequisite for a long-term settlement. Based on the legitimacy of such a multipartisan and unified consensus, the representatives of parliamentary democracy in Sri Lanka can then move on to the next stage of dealing with the demands of the separatist-nationalist paramilitaries of the LTTE in a more professional manner and attempting to fulfill the self-interest motives of most, if not all the parties concerned. Failure to do so effectively is, in my opinion, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a long-term and stable peace in Sri Lanka.

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