

Is the motivation for the suicide bombings of the Tamil Tigers religious or political?

“The Tamil Tigers are notorious for their suicide attacks, and the LTTE has carried out at least five times more such attacks than other similar organisations put together.

The suicide attackers consist of highly-motivated men and women who turn themselves into human bombs by strapping explosives onto their bodies.”¹

Before colonial rule, “Tamils controlled the northern part of Ceylon (renamed Sri Lanka in 1972), while the Sinhalese ruled the southern regions of the land,” but after the country gained independence, it was governed by a Sinhalese Prime Minister.²

According to an address by Douglas Devananda, Minister of Social Welfare of Sri Lanka, “though post-colonial Sri Lanka saw legislative changes which made Tamils feel they were being treated unequally and discriminated against, the majority Sinhalese felt Tamils got disproportionate advantages during colonial rule.”³

One of these changes made by the new government, in 1956, was to make Sinhala the official language “resulting in the start of ethnic and linguistic tensions in the country,”⁴ with “more than 100 Tamils killed in widespread violence” during protests against the new laws. Further rioting and violence leads to the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by Prabhakaran, who start their campaign of suicide attacks.⁵

“These attacks have had two coinciding agendas according to LTTE authorities: to gain the support of the Tamil people and to coerce the Sri Lankan government in granting the Tamils an independent homeland,” known by the Tamils as Eelam. “While religious difference may have been exploited by both sides during the conflict in order to justify the escalation of violence, the LTTE’s nationalistic, not religious, extremism shaped its strategy.”⁶

Some claim that their strong belief in the afterlife gives them strength to carry out their mission, as “there are no bodies, only seeds, they say. Once the dream of Tamil Eelam is achieved, the story goes, they will rise up as trees.”⁷

However, a Norwegian documentary which follows two Christian members of the LTTE claims that the suicide bombers “don't believe they will be rewarded in the afterlife or

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/526407.stm>

² <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/southasia/srilanka/history/palamkunnell1.html>

³ http://www.priu.gov.lk/news_update/Current_Affairs/ca200904/20090421president_committed_meet_aspirations_of_tamil_community.htm

⁴ <http://ipsnews.net/srilanka/timeline.shtml#1972r>

⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/country_profiles/1166237.stm

⁶ <http://www.poli.duke.edu/ugrad/duke%20journal/ujournal.html> - The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka:

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⁷ <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/14893/tamil-tigers-discipline-death-and-martyrdom>

anything like that, but they will be remembered every year on Heroes' Day, when all the villages ceremoniously honour their individual martyrs with pictures and candles.”

As well as wanting to become martyrs, many individuals would be pushed into the LTTE out of desperation, as in the Norwegian documentary. “Darshika says she joined the rebels as a 12-year-old after losing her father, and suffering abuse and humiliation at the hands of the military. The young Puhachudar and her family were rescued by Tamil Tiger rebels defending a bridge they had to cross to escape a military attack.

"Thanks to them (Tamil Tigers) our family was saved. When we were running through the shelling the army attacked us...But the movement fought back. That's how we survived. After that I felt that I had to save these (Tamil) people. I thought that if I don't join the movement, our people will be forced into slavery,"⁸

Once inside the suicide division, the Black Tigers, “individuals go through specialized training for a minimum of one year, during which they are indoctrinated by training specialists, videos of LTTE suicide bombings, isolation from other Tigers, and Prabhakaran himself.” “Black Tigers emerge brainwashed to believe an alternate reality, evidenced by a female cadre who, when apprehended by Sri Lankan forces, explained that her country, Eelam, was being attacked by Sinhalese terrorist groups.⁹ The LTTE has been highly successful in shaping reality for the Tigers and motivating them to blow themselves up; only one has ever reneged on his mission.^{10, 11}

The LTTE “does not regard itself as even a "civil" or "secular religion””. “The self-understanding of the LTTE is that it is beyond religion, not for and not against religion, even though we, as outsiders, can see that LTTE concepts are de facto heavily influenced by Hindu and Christian terms.”

The organisation itself however, allegedly has many of the attributes of extremist religion. “The LTTE has further produced by an elaborate symbolism of death and resurrection, a sacrificial commitment to the nation; there is a demand for "faith", a mysticism of blood and sacrifice, a cult of heroes and martyrs, and an intimate communion of brotherhood such as we find in mystery cults. There is also the establishment of a series of "statesponsored" calendrical rituals, all related to martyrdom. The LTTE has divided the year into the veneration of martyrs on five fixed different recurrent occasions.”¹²

According to a 2008 MI5 report on British terrorists, “far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practise their faith regularly. Many

⁸ <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42249>

⁹ Munasinghe, Major General Sarath. *A Soldier's Version*. Colombo: Market Information Systems, 2000. 178.

¹⁰ Joshi, Manoj. “On the Razor's Edge: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 19 (1996): 19-42.

¹¹ <http://www.poli.duke.edu/ugrad/duke%20journal/ujournal.html> - The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka: Unconventional Suicide Terrorism

¹² <http://www.tamilnation.org/ideology/schalk01.htm>

lack religious literacy and could actually be regarded as religious novices. Very few have been brought up in strongly religious households, and there is a higher than average proportion of converts.”¹³

Overall, I think that the political motivations are far more important than any religious ones in driving the Tamil Tigers to suicide bombing. The LTTE does share many features with religious terrorist organisations, but this is more due to its cult nature than any spiritualism, and although the organisation does use rituals, these are not as important as the brainwashing process in making individuals complete their suicide mission. The LTTE believes that the creation of Eelam is an ultimate aim that overshadows any other, and it is this concept of reaching their goal at any cost that is the group’s closest similarity to religious extremism.

¹³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1>