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## Diaspora Geopolitics

When states focus on diasporas through a securitizing lens, they often frame diaspora political engagement in terms of violent nationalisms, extremism and threat. At times the Tamil diaspora in Canada (the largest Tamil diaspora in the world) has been depicted in this way, especially after the Canadian government listed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a terrorist organization in 2006. New research suggests that this kind of depiction is not only a false claim based on the evidence available, but that any representation of diaspora folk from conflict zones where war crimes have occurred is a pernicious allegation at best and a damaging assertion about racialized people permanently living in Canada at worst. Based on extensive research with the diverse and heterogeneous Tamil diaspora in Canada (Southern Ontario to be specific), the research proposes a different view of diaspora nationalisms as transnational, influenced by democratic liberalism, and an expression of and related geopolitics shaped “from below,” within the exiled diaspora. The research analyzed draws from a larger Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)-funded project, “Geographies of Migrant Politics, Identity, and Belonging” (Principal Investigator Jennifer Hyndman; co-applicant Geraldine Pratt, University of British Columbia), and is authored by Hyndman (York Centre for Asian Research; Centre for Refugee Studies, York University), Amarnath Amarasingam (School of Religion, Queen's University) and Gayathri Naganathan (Department of Surgery, University of Toronto).

Through extensive interviews and focus groups with both first and second-generation respondents of Tamil ancestry living in Canada, Hyndman, Amarasingam and Naganathan seek to “understand transnational politics, identities and belonging, including Tamil nationalism in Canada.” They analyze two main themes from the extensive dataset they amassed: opinions of the militant separatist Tamil rebel group, the LTTE, and expressions of Tamil nationalism, both after the widespread killing of Tamil civilians in 2009.

In 2008 and early 2009, Sri Lankan state violence and war crimes killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, and displaced hundreds of thousands more. In response, different parts of the Tamil diaspora in Canada mobilized and protested the atrocities of the Sri Lankan government, and the Canadian government's inaction and silence on these extensive human rights violations. Their efforts gained particular media attention during a protest that stopped traffic along the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto.

In doing so, they enacted unique transnational geopolitics “from below,” and demonstrated how diaspora geopolitics “traverse national borders and defy any monolithic conception of belonging to, or making a home in a single country.”<sup>1</sup> By “diaspora geopolitics,” the authors refer to the diverse ways that people whose everyday lives have been uprooted and shaped by both violent conflict and spaces of asylum understand and protest war, violence and displacement, transnationally.



*Sam Javanrouh 2009 photograph via flickr*

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Rather than a singular conception of diaspora geopolitics, Hyndman, Amarasingam and Naganathan note that peoples' experiences of conflict and displacement are varied and shape diverse political responses. While some protests in Canada featured LTTE flags, others focused on liberal democratic discourse, such as United Nations' sanctions, and drew attention to the Canadian government's inaction when evidence of human rights atrocities in Sri Lanka became clear. The researchers contend that "such tactics worked to reverse the securitisation of the Tamils in the diaspora as threats themselves," as they were cast not as supporters of a militant group, but as concerned Canadians speaking out about human rights atrocities and war crimes through civic action. Liberalism, the authors contend, is not itself a solution to government securitization, but does counter common state concerns about dangerous or even terrorist aims of separatist groups.

This paper importantly highlights that the ways in which research with diaspora groups is framed matters a great deal. Research that focuses on extremism or frames newcomers and diaspora groups as risky or dangerous may contribute to further securitization of people who have themselves fled violent conflicts. Such research could even be considered as generating "a violence of its own, casting racialised newcomers as potential threats." The research found "little, if any, evidence to [ . . . link] diasporas from warzones [ . . . ] with extremist violence."<sup>2</sup> Rather, diasporas mobilized to protest violence—both the physically distant (but closely felt) violence of massacres in Sri Lanka and the proximate violence of state silence in Canada.

As thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in Sri Lanka in the last days of the war, it was largely members of the diaspora who publicized these war crimes, protested the violence against ordinary people, and called for action to stop the slaughter. Diaspora geopolitics recognizes people who left their countries of origin, not under conditions of their own making, as vital catalysts and political subjects of human rights atrocities, war crimes and violence. Members of the Tamil diaspora have represented the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka and worked to change it in ways that Tamils inside Sri Lanka could not. Politics and change focused on creating a more just society are not solely the purview of governments and politicians. Civil society-at-a-distance, namely diaspora members, are active participants in the everyday geopolitics of competing nationalisms.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Hyndman et al 2020, 3

<sup>2</sup> Hyndman et al. 2020, 15

### Source

Hyndman, J., A. Amarasingam, and G. Naganathan. 2020. "Diaspora Geopolitics in Toronto: Tamil Nationalism and the Aftermath of War in Sri Lanka." [Geopolitics](#).