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Performing an Insurgent Sovereign Experiment*

This chapter discusses the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) de facto state after the retreat of the Indian military in 1990, when the movement firmly asserted itself as the sole voice of Tamil nationalism, and its climax during the internationalised peace process of the 2000s. The subsequent LTTE defeat and its aftermath are discussed in Chapter 4. Like other insurgent movements and unrecognised forms of government (Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly 2015; Caspersen 2012; Corcuff 2012; Kyris 2022; Mampilly and Stewart 2021; Staniland 2014; Alice Wilson 2016), the LTTE operated in the conviction that *acting like* a state may lead to *being seen as* a state, which may lead to implied forms of acceptance and a better prospect of *becoming* a state. The movement set out to normalise and stabilise control over people and territory with an array of governing institutions, thus probing its trajectory towards more established institutions and implied forms of recognition. Other authors have described the probationary character of such an unfinished aspirational trajectory as a 'dress rehearsal' (McConnell [2016] in relation to Tibet) or an 'aporetic state' (Bryant and Hatay [2020] in relation to north Cyprus). I will describe the evolution of the LTTE's institutional framework as a sovereign experiment, an exploratory pursuit that comprises sovereign mimicry and sovereign encroachment.

* Parts of the first half of this chapter build directly on my joint work with Sidharthan Maunaguru (Klem and Maunaguru 2017, 2018). Some quotations I use and observations I make have previously appeared in these texts or in my work on wartime civil servants (Klem 2012). The second half of the chapter draws on material from confidential Norwegian archives and interviews with key figures, which were part of an official evaluation of the peace process, commissioned by the Norwegian government, co-authored by Jonathan Goodhand, Gunnar Sørbo and me (Goodhand, Klem and Sørbo 2011). In a slight stylistic break with other chapters, I will reference evidence taken from the Norwegian foreign ministry archives in the notes.

Sovereign mimicry is a form of citational practice (Weber 1998) whereby insurgencies replicate prior institutions, rules, buildings, uniforms, emblems and flags but make small adjustments. Like any other form of mimicry, this yields outcomes that seem like duplicates of the state but are in fact slightly different, and herein lies their unsettling potential (Bhabha 1994; see also Klem and Maunaguru 2017, 2018). Sovereign encroachment entails a practice of tacit restraint towards the purportedly hostile institutions of the Sri Lankan state and deliberate attempts at percolating and co-opting these institutions – a form of bricolage in support of insurgent assertions of rule. Crucially, the performative efforts of insurgent movements like the LTTE are undergirded by the capacity for violence, of both a disciplinary and a spectacular kind. The *de facto* sovereign ability (Hansen and Stepputat 2005) to enforce rules, impose punishments, control territory or recruit cadres adds gravity to insurgent institutional practices and enables them to hold their ground.

The blurry lines of sovereign encroachment, the tentative character of sovereign mimicry and the uncertainties around battlefield accomplishments yield an inherent indeterminacy. There is a fine line between mimicry and mockery, between looking authoritative and looking foolish, between percolating an institution and being sucked in. Performative efforts can be interrupted or reversed, and their credibility remains contingent. How do people respond to the proverbial clothes that the self-declared emperor has borrowed? Will the self-proclaimed rulers get away with their performance, or will someone pull out the rug from under them? The performative angle that I adopt mitigates the inclination to try and adjudicate whether the enacted institution is what it purports to be and instead underlines that one can never quite be sure about such judgements. In fact, to some degree this uncertainty is the point. Rebel rule tends to be accompanied by excitement, anxiety and anticipation *because* of this uncertainty, not despite of it.

Though much has been written about the LTTE, there are only few detailed empirical accounts, and there has been little systematic conceptual reflection on the movement's sovereign experiment. Initially known as the Tamil New Tigers (founded in 1972), the group renamed itself as the LTTE in 1976 (Balasingham 2004: 25). The emergence and evolution of the movement and its ideology have been well documented (Cheran 2009; Hellmann-Rajayanagam 1994b; Hoole et al. 1992; Schalk 1997a; Sumathy 2001; Thangarajah 2012). In the 1970s and early 1980s it was one of a whole raft of proliferating Tamil militias. With its origins on the Jaffna peninsula, the group had a strong northern signature and would only gain foothold in the east in the late 1980s. Though the LTTE embraced an agenda of social revolution alongside Tamil nationalism, it professed less of a leftist ideology than did

other groups. The Tigers stood out for their ruthless deployment of violence, especially when challenged from within (the group suffered two significant internal rifts) or from rival Tamil groups (it decimated the other Tamil militias in the mid-1980s). In the late 1980s, the LTTE became the dominant force of Tamil nationalism and arrogated itself the privilege of being the sole voice of the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

Scholarship has documented the movement's coercive violence (Hoole et al. 1992; Rajan Hoole 2001), its gender dynamics of combined emancipation-subjugation (Sitralaga Maunaguru 1995; Satkunanathan 2012; Sumathy 2016a) and its interlinkages with the large Tamil diaspora community (Fuglerud 2009; Laffey and Nadarajah 2016; Orjuela 2008). The first detailed academic study of the ground realities of the LTTE's state-like institutions was Trawick's (1997, 2007) ethnography of the eastern town Kokkadichchola, later followed by Stokke's (2006) article on the sprawling of LTTE institutions after the 2002 ceasefire. Both of these contributions, and Stokke's in particular, have received criticism for too readily adopting the benign self-image projected by the LTTE (Sarvanathan 2007; see Stokke [2007] for a rebuttal) – an attestation of the embattled problems of interpretation that this book is concerned with. Other authors have focused on specific aspects of the LTTE's institutional framework, including its Women's Wing (Brun 2008; De Mel 2007), courts (Provost 2021), cemeteries (Natali 2008), symbolic repertoires (Terpstra and Frerks 2018) and subtle regional differences in the movement's conduct (Thangarajah 2012). Sharika Thiranagama's (2011) ethnography of Tamil militancy and everyday life during the Sri Lankan civil war discusses the articulation of different kinds of life and death under the LTTE and the pervasive impact of the movement's surveillance regime, but it deliberately displaces the LTTE as the central force.

This chapter complements the scholarship on the LTTE by considering it in terms of institutional mimicry and encroachment and disciplinary and spectacular violence. Rather than classifying these efforts as state or non-state, real or pseudo, the chapter highlights the many inherent tensions of the LTTE experiment. The movement became a *de facto* sovereign formation in the sense that it ruled people and territory in an unchallenged manner. But at the same time, its rule was enacted through the convoluted practices of encroachment: blurry lines, institutional overlap and tactical restraint. As a result of these contradictions and overlaps, the institutions of the LTTE's sovereign experiment were simultaneously normal and stunning, worldly and divine, orderly and capricious. These contradictions were no sign of incompleteness, a leftover tension that was yet to be resolved; rather, they stood at the heart of LTTE sovereignty.

Sovereign aspirations and disregard for human life

My discussion of the LTTE's sovereign experiment starts where it began for me: in Sampur, a small rural town on Sri Lanka's east coast. It was 2000, and I was a master's student collecting material for my research thesis. Much of what I am about to write was not clear to me at the time. I will introduce Sampur in some detail, as we will return to this locality in later chapters.

Sampur is located on the southern mouth of the Koddiiyar Bay, across from Trincomalee's adulated natural harbour (see Map 2.1). It is a settlement of Vellala cultivators, who are considered to be a high caste, and it is home to a well-known Hindu temple with a history predating the arrival of colonial powers. Situated in one of Sri Lanka's most ethnically mixed districts, Sampur is known for being an exclusively Tamil space, surrounded by Muslim-dominated towns like Muttur and Tophur and the Sinhala settlement colonies around Seruwila, which were erected from the 1950s onwards (Gaasbeek 2010: 80–82). It was plausibly for this reason of being a 'pure Tamil space', along with its strategic location opposite Trincomalee's navy harbour, that Sampur became a regional hub and model village for the LTTE in the 1990s, much like Kokkadichcholai further south (Trawick 2007).

When I first visited Sampur in 2000, getting there required a visit to the army's civil affairs office at the Monkey Bridge camp before passing the government military checkpoint at the eastern outskirts of Muttur. After the barrier at the Muttur checkpoint was a dirt road that crossed an arm of the lagoon at a small, run-down viaduct, locally known as Majeed's Bridge.¹ This was the point where de facto Tamil Eelam began, the illustrious territory ruled by the LTTE as a Tamil state in the making. There was no checkpoint or visible surveillance – everyone knew the movement did not need such clumsy measures to monitor everyday life.

Strangers (like me) had to report to the local LTTE compound in Sampur. The small town was home to several LTTE institutions. There was an LTTE office and an LTTE bank, talk of LTTE armed positions and a secret medical surgery theatre, and an LTTE cemetery which showcased neat lines of impressive tombstones for fallen cadres. The impeccable state of the graves contrasted with Sampur's general run-down condition. Roads were in an even poorer state than in government-controlled rural areas – even at slow speed, traversing all the potholes was an arduous undertaking. Many buildings were ruined or poorly maintained, and there was no public electricity (Photo 3.1).

Photograph 3.1 Traveling to Sampur



Source: Photograph by author.

Note: One of three ramshackle cable ferries on the bumpy dirt track along the Koddiiyar Bay, the access to and from Sampur, in 2010. Soon after, a brand-new major road with bridges would open – one of the many hallmarks of the postwar government’s vision on developmental take-off (and of the foreign debts that would trouble Sri Lanka in years to follow).

But apart from that, Sampur looked a lot like other rural Sri Lankan towns. It was only on special occasions like the annual commemoration of LTTE martyrs (*Maaveerar Naal* on 27 November) that Sampur’s status as a model village of Tamil Eelam became visible. I happened to drive across Sampur the day before the celebration in 2000. We had to abort our trip and turn around when we came to a small bridge that had been converted into a triumphal arch with such an abundance of garlanding, flags and flowers that no car could pass. The plaque at the heart of it depicted cadres who had died for the cause. The next day, we were told, there would be parades, speeches and public ceremonies. Buses would be chartered. The whole community would join martyr families to visit the LTTE cemetery and pay respect to those who had sacrificed their life. The highlight of the day, not least for Tamils living elsewhere in the world, was something like an Eelam version of the State of the Nation: the live broadcast of the annual speech of LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran in which he would reflect on the past year and foreshadow what was to come.

The office of Sampur's LTTE commander, which I visited several times in this period, was in a converted residence with a few armed guards in the centre of town across from the main school, the only multi-storey building in Sampur. I vividly remember one encounter with him in late 2000. I had come to ask permission to conduct field research in a neighbouring LTTE-controlled village with a Tamil man from Trincomalee who translated for me. All three of us were in our early twenties. The meeting was brief – he saw no problem with our work. As we got up to leave the house, the LTTE commander engaged in what seemed like small talk with my companion, but when we were out on the road and took our moped off its stand, I saw his hands shaking and fear in his eyes. The commander had casually asked him what his name was and where he lived. Upon hearing the answer, he had paused to think and then said something to the effect of: 'Ah yes, it is at the end of that alley, right? With that particular tree in the garden.' The commander then casually inquired after his parents and sister, using their intimate names normally reserved for the inner family, and he referred to things in their living room. It is not hard to see how one could come by such information. But to a young Tamil man of recruitable age standing face-to-face with a commander who pretends to simply recall these intimate details from memory, this was an intimidating way of 'being known', an invasive kind of surveillance that made government checkpoints with uninterested soldiers glancing over identification papers while asking routine questions look amateurishly ineffective.²

The ability of the LTTE commander to instil fear and docility with a few well-posed questions was a testament to the movement's infamous reputation. The LTTE's assertion of power rested squarely on the movement's capacity for violence. Like any other Sri Lankan, my companion knew full well how the LTTE dealt with anyone resisting orders. The liquidation of supposed traitors and the LTTE's brutal massacre of other militant groups in the 1980s loomed large in the collective memory. The systematic assassination of more moderate, non-violent advocates of Tamil nationalism – politicians, peace activists, human rights defenders – had closed all space for dissent (Bose 2002; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994b; Hoole et al. 1992; S. Thiranagama 2010, 2011). A mere recital of those who were killed would suffice to delineate the discursive dead zone of Tamil public consciousness under the LTTE: Amir (Amirthalingam, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi [ITAK] leader), Rajani (Thiranagama, academic and human rights activist), Neelan (Thiruchelvam, constitutional lawyer and peace architect), Ketesh (Loganathan, former militant and peace advocate), and so on. Like any other Tamil inhabitant of the northeast, my companion had memories of young children being dragged out of their house to be forcibly conscripted as cadres. New recruits unable to execute the training drills were

beaten and mistreated. There were harsh punishments for failure to pay taxes, the consumption of alcohol or extra-marital sex (Hoole et al. 1992; Rajan Hoole 2015; Sumathy 2016a; Thamizhini 2021; Thangarajah 2012). Some of these punishments were meted out in public. It was dangerous to say anything that could be construed as questioning or criticising the movement. ‘We only open our mouth to eat’, people would tell me.

The ubiquitous fear of the movement’s violent capacities was matched by widespread support and admiration. The extent of this support was difficult to verify, but there was no doubt that large numbers of Tamils sympathised with the national cause and shared a sense of awe and respect for the movement’s prowess and determination. The hardship endured by LTTE cadres, their perseverance against the odds, the courage they mustered to take on a better-equipped army and the fact that they seemed incorruptible all endowed the LTTE with an enigmatic reputation.

The LTTE’s repertoire of violent sacrifice and sacralised devotion had a rich but discordant pedigree. It was influenced by the martial idioms of India’s independence movement, most obviously the Nazi-inspired anti-imperialism of Subhas Chandra Bose. At the same time, it adopted specifically Tamil forms of warrior adulation and martyrdom from the Dravidian movement (in turn inspired by Hindu rites of the precolonial Bhakti movement), which pitted itself in direct opposition to the Brahmin domination and pan-Indian nationalism associated with Bose and his ilk (Roberts 2014; Schalk 1997a, 1997b; Trawick 2007). More concretely, LTTE cadres were known to have a necklace with a cyanide pill to avoid being captured alive. This became a symbol of their selfless dedication to the cause. Martyrs were referred to as *tiyaki* – literally, those who had ‘voluntarily abandoned life’ (Fuglerud 2009; Schalk 1997a, 1997b; S. Thiranagama 2011). Chief among these were the so-called black tigers, a suicide squad that became a significant military instrument, mainly for the assassination of high-profile public figures. But suicide attacks were not just an effective military tactic; they also projected a cult of LTTE dedication and shrewdness, celebrating how Tamil youth used their own lives as a weapon against the enemy. A special place was reserved for them in martyr cemeteries, where they were venerated in the absence of a grave as superhuman figures: the *kaval theivankal*, or protective gods of Eelam (Klem and Maunaguru 2017).

Prabhakaran, the movement’s supreme commander, epitomised this mixture of nationalist ideology, violent determination and divine resonance. As the founder of the movement, he remained the unquestioned leader until the very end. He outmanoeuvred and outlived many of his enemies, including the Sri Lankan president Premadasa and former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, to name two famous opponents who were killed in suicide attacks.

Prabhakaran also outlived his fellow militants: leaders of other groups had died or were forced to turn to the government, and most other Tigers from the early days had died in the war. LTTE cadres replaced their birth name with a nom de guerre, but not Prabhakaran.³ He was simply referred to as *talaivar* (leader) or *anna* (older brother). In LTTE propaganda, he was also referred to as the sun god (*suriya thevan*), a divine figure with superhuman qualities of foresight and omniscience and a perplexing ability to escape death – a figure who, like the gods, was capable of unleashing sublime violence when enraged. As illustrated in diaries kept by cadres (Thamizhini 2021), he was a man who was rarely sighted but whose presence was often felt. Meeting Prabhakaran was seen as a scarce privilege, reserved for a very small selection of cadres and visitors. Suicide cadres had a last meal with him before they were deployed on their fatal mission.

These theological dimensions of LTTE rule illustrate that there is more at stake here than drafting regulations and enforcing them. Sovereign power does not only encompass the measured trappings of discipline but also a ruthless ability to strike with a spectacular show of violent force. Like deities, sovereign rulers have both a benign side and a violent face. They have the potency to unleash sublime violence when their authority is challenged, and they need to set the record straight. The LTTE's ritualisation of martyrdom, its repertoire of violent sacrifice, the harsh punishments for treason and the cult around Prabhakaran resonate well with this conceptualisation of divine kingship.

Prabhakaran pervaded the entire LTTE repertoire of sacrifice, struggle and authorised force. It is perhaps no coincidence that the word *talaivar* translates into German as *Führer*. As pointed out by Agamben (2005), the notion of *Führertum* positions the leader as the sovereign referent, the embodiment of the cause and the foundation of law – not simply an authority but the one authorised to bestow authority.⁴ All the chains of self-referential authorisation – including the authority to establish rules and institutions and the subsequent ability to impose exceptions to them – ultimately derived from Prabhakaran, without whom the entire effort would be unsettled.⁵

This cult of an unchallengeable commander resonated throughout the Tamil community. And in this sense, Prabhakaran himself became the sovereign referent not just of the LTTE but also of Tamil nationalism more widely, even if there were many who opposed or detested him. Let me illustrate this with a quotation from a senior Tamil civil servant in Trincomalee who was well into retirement age and had all the qualities of a bureaucratic habitus: the dress, the diction, the predilection for text, procedure and paperwork, and an archival memory for political history. He was, in other words, the opposite of a youth militant, but, like so many Tamils, he confessed that he

could but admire their dedication and sacrifice. 'I never joined a militant group', he told me.

I don't like violence.... Non-violent struggle is more powerful. If both parties have a stick, the people think both must be guilty. Think of [the LTTE cadre] Thileepan, who died of a hunger strike in 1987. Still people talk about him. Why? Because his non-violence is so powerful. I respect [former ITAK leader] Chelvanayakam, but he was a man of compromise.

He paused for a minute and closed his eyes and then said with a concentrated emphasis: 'Prabhakaran's beauty was: if he does anything, he will do it perfectly. He would tell his people to do something: do it or die.' He almost seemed in trance for a moment. When he opened his eyes, he stared at me intently. The line between violence and non-violence is evidently quite thin here, but what runs across it is a reverence for unconditional dedication matched with a disregard of human life, be it one's own or someone else's.

The blurred boundaries of sovereign encroachment

The paradox within the LTTE sovereign experiment and the emergence of a de facto state of Tamil Eelam in the 1990s and 2000s is that it presented LTTE rule both as a visible display of systematic order (with institutions, offices, uniforms and codified rules) and simultaneously as an intractable violent force. Much of the power of the LTTE was derived from the fact that one could never be sure of what the LTTE was up to, what it was able to see and hear, what military capacities it had in store and where it would strike next. My Tamil companion's encounter with the LTTE commander in Sampur was suggestive of this capricious potential. Similarly, the *talaivar* Prabhakaran was ungraspable. He did not reside in a palace where one could request an audience. His whereabouts were subject to continuous speculation; like the gods, he would reveal himself.

This tension between the orderly and the capricious must inform our understanding of the LTTE's unfolding institutional landscape. First, it is intuitive to assume that rules and institutions are somehow foundational to governmental conduct. But what the evolution of the de facto sovereign framework of the LTTE shows is that the practices, violent coercion and compliance regimes came first, and the institutional shells were added later. The movement's violent capacities and capricious ability to strike never actually disappeared. Yes, there were institutions and rules, but the rules could change, and not all violent conduct was bound by them. Notably, as Sharika Thiranyagama (2011: 215) points out, the two most significant kinds of death,

the sacrifice of the martyr and the obliteration of the traitor, were exceptional – neither involved the measured trappings of discipline. Second, it is intuitive to interpret institutions as a form of rendering natural: when offices and courts are stabilised, they gain legitimacy and respect, and people will abide by their rules. This may be so, but a crucial element of people’s awe and amazement for the various LTTE offices was that the LTTE’s institutional efforts were in fact not natural at all. There was a widespread amazement for the boldness, creativity and perseverance of the LTTE in creating what had long been unthinkable: a Tamil state ruling Tamil people in Tamil territory. A group that had started with youngsters on bicycles, commonly referred to as ‘our boys’ (*namada podiyankal*), had started running something resembling a government – and they pulled it off!

To understand the significance of the LTTE’s sovereign experiment, we thus need to consider how the experiment originated. I encountered the LTTE in 2000 when it was acting like a state, fighting a near-symmetrical war with the government and controlling significant territories (see Map 2.1): the culmination of a long historical process since the movement’s creation in the 1970s. Some qualities of the LTTE were relatively constant throughout its history, most obviously its staunch Tamil nationalist outlook, its preoccupation with Tamil grievances and its bold conviction that these injustices could only be redressed by an uncompromising violent insurgency. Other elements of its agenda proved more pliable, most obviously its commitment to social emancipation. The LTTE transformed gerontocratic hierarchies and gender roles. It was ruled by youngsters, and it adopted from other Tamil groups the practice of recruiting female cadres (after having initially belittled the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front [EPRLF] and the People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam [PLOTE] for recruiting women; Satkunanathan 2012: 31). These young women displayed non-traditional roles of authority and had distinct outfits of boots, belts and braids (Sitralaga Maunaguru 1995; Thamizhini 2021; R. Thiranagama 1992). Female suicide bombers made an enormous impression. Sympathisers glorified LTTE girls and women as self-assertive agents of liberation (Ann 1993; Schalk 1994). Other authors underlined that the LTTE’s concern with women’s social advancement was always subservient to the armed quest of Tamil nationalism (Coomaraswamy 1996). In short, Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham (2009: 132) posit: ‘Women must [be] and are controlled by the LTTE to be armed virgins before marriage and allowed sexual relations only once they have accepted the institutions of marriage’. Yet the movement’s law-and-order feminism had profound intended and unintended ramifications on Tamil society (Alison 2003; De Alwis 2002; De Mel 2001, 2004; Gowrinathan 2017; Sitralaga Maunaguru 1995; Satkunanathan 2012; S. Thiranagama 2011). The LTTE commitment

to eradicating caste hierarchies and other anti-revolutionary cultural traditions yielded similarly ambivalent outcomes (Bose 1994; Bremner 2013; Klem and Maunaguru 2018). Many of the traditional norms that contravened the LTTE's revolutionary outlook continued to prevail in subdued form, only to come back out into the open after the war (see Chapter 4).

Most significantly for this chapter's line of argument, the LTTE's strategy of adopting a sovereign state-like posture evolved over time, gradually yielding a structure embedded in Tamil society but also set aside from it. In the early 1980s, the movement staged hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, bank robberies and prison breaks. In this period, cadres maintained close ties with their families. The affectionate reference to the movement as 'our boys' was reflective of the intimate relations between many Tamil families and a movement comprised of their kin (Klem and Maunaguru 2017; S. Thiranagama 2011). Though that masculine familial trope continued to be used, the proximity between the cadres and Tamil society changed in the late 1980s. The LTTE transformed through India's attempt to impose a peace settlement. It was against the background of New Delhi trying to outmanoeuvre the LTTE by offering other groups diplomatic and military support that the movement crushed rival Tamil militants, leaving deep scars within Tamil society. In the process, the LTTE declared itself the sole voice of the Tamils, thus narrowing the diverse arena of Tamil nationalism into a coercively singular landscape. Moreover, the LTTE cult of self-sacrifice matured against the Indian military,⁶ and the movement derived an enigma of invincibility by successfully taking standing up against the regional hegemon.

In the early 1990s, the movement controlled small swathes of territory and started burying its cadres in venerated graves, inscribing their sacrifice in the land (Schalk 1997a). Furthermore, it sought to ethnically 'purify' its territories by violently driving out the Muslims (S. Thiranagama 2011: ch. 3; Hasbullah 2001) as well as people who were considered deviant, such as transgenders (Sumathy 2016b), a purge known as the Eviction. The LTTE started to develop a more methodical administration on the Jaffna Peninsula, not only to systematically enforce recruitment and taxation but also to deal with myriad local issues in need of adjudication. The movement was driven out of Jaffna in the mid-1990s and took its subject population with it in retreat: the so-called Exodus (S. Thiranagama 2011: 67–73). By consequence, its sovereign efforts came of age in what had always been a marginal part of the Tamil homeland: the rural scrublands of the Vanni region.

In sum, the LTTE's institutional landscape that we know from the late 1990s and early 2000s evolved from the gradual systematisation of this sequence of impromptu governing practices. The traces of this gradual process were still

discernible in 2000, when I first encountered the LTTE in Sampur. Sovereignty is associated with supreme power, a totalising ability to enforce rules. But rather than a straightforward sovereign imposition, the evolution of the LTTE de facto state was characterised by a process of sovereign encroachment. It involved blurry lines, deliberate ambiguities and overlaps, and forms of tactical restraint and connivance. It did not simply erase the prior institutional landscape but gradually pervaded it by co-opting, inverting, redirecting or tweaking the existing institutions.

This blurriness first became clear to me in the weeks after the aforementioned meeting with the LTTE commander in Sampur. We had visited him because I wanted to conduct a study of a small income generation project run by a Dutch NGO in a village that I have called Adivasipuram elsewhere (Klem and Maunaguru 2018⁷). Adivasipuram is not far from Sampur, about an hour's cycle on a dirt track (today a mere 10 minutes on a motorcycle), but the socio-economic differences are striking. Its inhabitants belong to the indigenous Veddah community,⁸ and most of them lived in *cadjan* (palm leaf) huts; others had built rudimentary brick walls with asbestos roofs. The local Hindu temple had a tiny shrine, and the village had but one small shop that sold basic household items, agrarian implements and – if one was lucky – a few soft drinks and biscuits. Adivasipuram's inhabitants struggled to make ends meet with agrarian labour, hunting, collecting forest products and fishing. The livelihood project I had come to study comprised a micro-credit scheme offering revolving loans to rear goats or chickens or engage in 'home-gardening' (growing vegetables for sale). It operated through the local community platform that one finds in virtually every rural Sri Lankan village: the Rural Development Society, or RDS.

I never saw a single LTTE cadre in Adivasipuram, but it soon dawned on me that LTTE oversight did not require visible patrols. My interviews with the RDS leaders tended to result in evasive answers, and as a novice to fieldwork it took me some time to understand what their equivocation was signalling. I was initially frustrated by their inability to provide me with such basic things as a list of beneficiaries and a financial overview, but with time I surmised they themselves had neither of these things. They would cycle back and forth to the LTTE office in Sampur to obtain instructions and get the project funds which had been deposited in an LTTE bank.

Meanwhile, in my household interviews, I learned more about the activities of the RDS. In the past, the RDS had organised *shramadanas*, or collective community work to clean up, clear bushes, level tracks: a common occurrence in rural Sri Lanka. But when I was told about youngsters with spades putting their labour to public service, it occurred to me that a small adjustment could completely change the picture – what if the spades became rifles? It was only

a small step from this kind of mobilisation to full-fledged recruitment for the cause of national liberation. This idea took firmer root when I heard that the same group of people had been involved in enforcing particular rules (such as banning alcohol), a common practice throughout LTTE territory. Punishments could be crude: some people recounted the use of physical force and people being placed in a plot surrounded by barbed wire. People's recollection of these practices revealed slippage between the RDS and the LTTE. This confused me, as they were two different entities in my mind. But perhaps this ambiguity was the point, I realised, when I learnt that almost all of the youngsters who had participated in the social work of the RDS were no longer in the village. They had joined the battle, and most of them never returned. I had been studying what I thought was a village development institution, but I slowly came to realise that I was exploring a tentacle of the insurgency that policed the community and recruited cadres by proxy.

RDSs were originally a government invention. They exist across rural Sri Lanka and often function as a clearing house between state entities or specific politicians and the respective community (Brow 1996). The basic concept of village development societies being used for political penetration of rural areas was thus not something the LTTE came up with; they just reoriented it as a contrarian state project. Interestingly, these ties to Sri Lankan state entities were not completely severed when the LTTE brought RDSs like the one in Adivasipuram into its orbit. The lowest rungs of the government bureaucracy – *grama niladaris* (village- or ward-level officers) – continued to interact with the RDS as a representation of the people. Through such connections, a small trickle of government welfare benefits (mainly *samurdhi* poverty relief) continued to flow into LTTE-controlled areas, and the movement made no effort to block this. It would not have been difficult for the movement to force the RDS to shun any ties with the Sri Lankan government and demand complete and exclusive loyalty, but the LTTE evidently preferred an approach of tactical restraint and ambiguity, at least for the time being.

A more significant form of LTTE restraint could be found in the heart of Sampur, at the Sri Paththirakaali *kovil*, a major Hindu temple. Like virtually any other social institution in the territories under its control, the LTTE attempted to regulate temples as part of its sovereign project. The need to do so was prompted by the social divisions and hierarchies of temple affairs. Like so many other temples, the Sri Paththirakaali temple was subject to fiercely contested hierarchies of caste and intra-caste *kudis* (clans), which became manifest in the temple board and at the temple festival. This particular temple was controlled by a subset of *kudis* from the local Vellala caste while other *kudis* (as well as other castes) were excluded. Such intra-Tamil discrimination and discord was

at odds with the LTTE's outlook of a national liberation movement. In the 1990s, the local commander therefore decreed that the excluded *kudis* be incorporated in the ritual festivities of the annual temple festivals. Much in line with observations in other LTTE-controlled areas (Klem and Maunaguru 2018; Sidharthan Maunaguru 2021; Maunaguru and Spencer 2013), this invoked resistance, a member from one of the leading temple families told me. In protest to the LTTE's intrusion in Hindu affairs, the temple management called off the annual festival altogether – a major affront – and the LTTE commander caved in.⁹ There is no question that the movement had the coercive power to enforce its rules, but the cost of alienating a significant Tamil community made a position of tactical restraint and ambiguity preferable, lest it be seen attacking the people, places and traditions that it claimed to be fighting for.

Performing sovereignty on an international stage

Not long after my stay in Sampur and Adivasipuram, the LTTE's sovereign experiment took a quantum leap. The Norwegian-facilitated peace process took off, after a long and troublesome run-on.¹⁰ As in other conflict hotspots, Norway presented itself as a peace broker, offering soft-power mediation – while boosting its own reputation, relevance and access on the global stage. This period comprised the climax of the LTTE sovereign experiment, where it expanded its performances of statehood to the international arena in pursuit of recognition. Much in line with my analysis earlier, this engendered a convoluted process of gradual expansion and encroachment, where the LTTE leapfrogged marginal opportunity spaces and tacit forms of implied acknowledgement. As we know from other cases, international acceptance may be highly variegated, and rifts between official recognition and actual treatment may conjure up both challenges and possibilities – ask the governments of Somaliland, North Cyprus, Kosovo, Taiwan or any other partly recognised state (Caspersen 2012; Jeffrey, McConnell and Wilson 2015; Krasniqi 2019; Kyris 2022; Pegg and Kolstø 2015; Thompson 2006).

Of central importance to the LTTE's separatist outlook was the conversion of de facto military parity with the Sri Lankan government into de facto political parity, which the LTTE aspired to ultimately convert into de jure recognition. In that sense, the ceasefire marked a moment of triumph and anticipation. It was not a truce that the movement had been forced into.¹¹ The LTTE had successfully deterred the government military and rapidly regained large swaths of territory (even if its attempt to reconquer Jaffna had failed). It had started running a de facto sovereign administration in its territory, which the government had been

unable to stop. It had provoked the government by declaring a sequence of monthly unilateral ceasefires in late 2000 and early 2001. And it subsequently outmanoeuvred President Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka Freedom Party, or SLFP) by striking a bargain with her United National Party (UNP) arch-rival, the newly elected prime minister Wickremesinghe, with whom the movement signed an official, internationally monitored ceasefire on 22 February 2002. In the subsequent year, the delegation of LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham was flown around the world to negotiate with the government. 'The boys' were clearly no longer just boys. They were treated like diplomats in foreign embassies; they sat on the stage as a party equal to the government; and the world media queued up to take pictures and interview them at press conferences. The performative benefits were enormous. From a Tamil nationalist perspective, this comprised an endorsement of the movement's military accomplishments and its emerging *de facto* state. And it offered a vantage point for converting these *de facto* realities into something official.

The LTTE used the relative calm of the ceasefire to bolster its own institutions. The Vanni became a showcase region for LTTE governance. Having consolidated its territory in the Vanni, the LTTE moved its administrative hub in Mallavi (a small village where international humanitarian agencies had established themselves to coordinate their Vanni operations) to the town of Kilinochchi, which emerged as the *de facto* capital of Tamil Eelam. A growing palette of LTTE departments popped up along the town's main road, each with impressive office buildings surrounded by gardens, official signposts, flags and a modest fleet of official vehicles: the Political Wing, the Peace Secretariat, the Planning and Development Secretariat, the Department of Education, the Tamil Eelam Police headquarters, different kinds of courts, a human rights secretariat and more. Some of these institutions were new inventions; others had existed in some form and were now further officialised. Letterheads, visiting cards and uniforms proliferated.

Much in sync with this rapid expansion of the LTTE's institutional dramaturgy, major changes took place at the front line. The entry to the Vanni had long had an LTTE checkpoint (unlike in Sampur), but of a functional, military kind. With the ceasefire, it was moved from a jungle track near Madhu to the main road in Omanthai, and it was transformed into an elaborate gateway to Tamil Eelam. A new customs service was created with a new uniform. Visitors had to fill out various kinds of paperwork, answer questions, pay import taxes and submit their vehicles to checks. The procedures were all friendly and professional, especially to international visitors – this was not the kind of checkpoint where one would worry about being harassed or where the half-baked questioning by poorly motivated soldiers seemed like a

pointless nuisance. Everything about the conduct of the LTTE customs officers service suggested they were adamant about performing the quintessentially sovereign task of marking a border, not just by mimicking the Sri Lankan government but by enacting a superior version. Significantly, the staged gateway to Tamil Eelam enjoyed implicit international endorsement: the government allowed it to exist, the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire agreement provided written acknowledgement of LTTE-controlled territory (further bolstered by the International Committee of the Red Cross monitors occupying a post between the government and LTTE checkpoints) and international visitors queued up to join the show and see Tamil Eelam for themselves.

Having cleared customs, most visitors would proceed on the A9, a rudimentary gravel road which was soon to be asphalted. Large billboards had been placed along the road, informing visitors about life in Tamil Eelam, glorifying the work of various LTTE-associated organisations and applauding their dedication to the cause and their loyalty to the leader. Upon arrival in Kilinochchi, most visitors could not resist taking snapshots of the various signs and buildings of the unfolding LTTE state before joining the performative action inside. Journalists and academics conducted official interviews, aid workers coordinated their projects, diplomats engaged with political officers. More photos were taken, including by LTTE communication officers who would post them on their various websites. The more prestigious visitors would be offered an official lunch, or – if they stayed the night – accommodation in the official LTTE hotel, where two enormous pictures of *talaivar* Prabhakaran decorated the stairwell. Like the LTTE lunch, the LTTE rooms were decent but not exorbitant, as if to signal the movement was serious but moderated.

The LTTE Political Wing reciprocated these visits and travelled to remote places like Oslo, Berlin and other European capitals. As mentioned at the very outset of this book, I was a junior researcher at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague at the time. I vividly remember the visit of the LTTE Political Wing leader S. P. Tamilselvan (a suave senior cadre who walked with a cane), his elderly translator George, the head of the LTTE Peace Secretariat S. Pulitheevan, and a handful of male and female representatives of various other LTTE departments, typically in their twenties. It was clear that some of them were still getting used to wearing blazers and loafers and casually walking around in seventeenth-century manors.

It was as exciting for us as it was for them. One does not host the delegation of an aspiring sovereign state every day. It had long been virtually impossible to meet any senior LTTE officer, and now they were right there in the meeting room down the hall. I could not help feeling that we needed to act the part: that is, to host them as what they were trying to be, with a discursive language that

matched theirs. So there we were, talking about the prospects and challenges of a sovereign Tamil state, occasionally hinting at critical issues but never offending our guests outright. Figureheads like Tamilselvan and Pulitheevan were the talk of the Colombo expat circuits in those years. Diplomats, advisors and aid workers exchanged observations, interpretations and gossip, and they came up with creative workarounds to grapple with this unusual situation.¹²

For both domestic and international audiences, there was something exciting about the evolution of the LTTE's sovereign experiment. All the acting normal was matched with the realisation that this was, in fact, extraordinary. LTTE institutions were headed by people who had been jungle child soldiers just a few years ago and were now advancing on the world stage. It was an improvised performance from all ends. Of course, all forms of protocol and diplomatic exchange have theatrical qualities, but this was an unusually exciting kind of theatre, an unbounded, experimental kind of theatre – there was no telling when the curtains would fall, what the stage would look like when they did and which protagonists would still be standing. Notwithstanding the cordial exchanges, the movement's violent track record was obvious, and it continued to be banned as a terrorist group in powerful countries like India and the United States. The movement's leader Prabhakaran insulated himself from all these interactions, and there was no way to predict his next moves. Despite the mushrooming of bureaucratic institutions along the Kilinochchi main road, the capricious potential of the movement never lifted.

Showdown of asymmetry

The Norwegian-facilitated peace process offered the LTTE an international stage, but this proved to be a perilous podium for the insurgents. The expeditious take-off of the peace process had been precipitated by a shallow convergence of interest between the UNP government, the LTTE and the Norwegian foreign ministry, each of which sought to marginalise President Kumaratunga (SLFP), but for very different reasons. The Norwegian mediators had internally formulated a peace strategy,¹³ but the ink was barely dry when they fell out with the president.¹⁴ Their plan lay in shambles, and they needed a face-saving exit. The newly elected UNP, locked in a life-long rivalry with the SLFP, needed a quick win to wrest the political initiative from their political arch-rival Kumaratunga. Only two years prior, the same UNP had derailed Kumaratunga's attempt to initiate peace talks (demonstratively burning the substantive core of her peace plan: the so-called devolution package), but now the tables had turned, and the Norwegian peace effort

offered a means to outmanoeuvre her. The LTTE despised Kumaratunga for the violence she had inflicted on them in the late 1990s, and they rejected the conditions she had posed for the signing of a ceasefire or the commencement of formal talks. The UNP offered them an opportunity to embark on a peace process without such requirements.

The divergence underlying this shallow convergence were exposed when core political issues were tabled at the Oslo talks of December 2002. After that meeting, the Norwegian government issued a press release stating that both sides had agreed to 'explore a solution founded on the principle of internal self-determination in areas of historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking peoples, based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka'.¹⁵ The ambiguity of combining Tamil nationalist lingo (internal self-determination) with Sinhala nationalist lingo (united Sri Lanka) under the rubric of a term that neither side embraced (federalism) provoked knee-jerk reactions in both the Tamil and Sinhala camp. Instead of jointly exploring constitutional reform and federal power-sharing, subsequent talks were about damage control. The Muslim community, in turn, was alarmed by the suggestion of a federal arrangement, fearing a scenario where the northeastern Muslim community would be sacrificed as a small ethnic minority in a Tamil-dominated region. This gave new impetus to Muslim youth protests, demands for safeguards and protections and propositions for self-government in a non-contiguous Muslim region (Lewer and Ismail 2011; Mohideen 2006). As the peace talks stalled and distrust grew, ground-level realities in the northeast continued to yield instability with regular ceasefire violations, gross human right abuses and unclaimed killings.

To equip the peace process with shock breakers, backchannels and consultation mechanisms, a whole architecture of ceasefire monitors, peace process co-chairs, sub-committees, development donor facilities and civil society initiatives had been set up.¹⁶ Central to the whole design was Norway's self-presentation as a non-coercive mediator with an even-handed, consensual approach towards the government and the LTTE. This attempt to sidestep the question of sovereignty and the associated conundrums of (a)symmetry soon emerged as the cardinal problem in managing the peace process. By enacting the peace process as one of two equal sides, fundamental disagreement on this issue had been deferred to a later date. When that date came, the process unravelled. As described earlier, the LTTE entered the peace process from a position of military strength. It had successfully insisted on a state mediator (and ceasefire monitors) to counter-leverage Sri Lanka's privileged position as a state,¹⁷ and it had outmanoeuvred President Kumaratunga by negotiating with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe instead. The prime minister went along with the premise of parity in the signing of the ceasefire and the format of

the talks. But given his weak position (stuck in a cohabitation arrangement with arch-rival Kumaratunga and mustering only a slim simple majority in parliament), any compromise Wickremesinghe's negotiators could offer would have to stick to the bounds of the constitution, parliamentary endorsement and presidential approval – the very premises that the LTTE, and the Tamil nationalist movement more broadly, had long fulminated against.

The Norwegian team similarly deferred the question of asymmetry. From the moment overtures to the LTTE were made, the foreign ministry worried about being seen as too 'LTTE-friendly'.¹⁸ The Norwegians nevertheless embarked on an even-handed peace process between two asymmetrical political entities. This process had the appearance of parity between the parties, but it took place in a regional and international context that offered very little scope to treat the LTTE like a state. The Norwegian government was not equipped to redress the fundamental asymmetries at stake, and when these came to the fore, the process derailed.

The LTTE suspended its participation because of its concern with the asymmetries of the international constellation around the peace process. The movement's leadership knew that the implied political parity of the peace process could be undone with a stroke of the pen. The government was hedging its inability to make constitutional compromises.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the ceasefire placed no restrictions on the government procuring arms or recruiting troops, while the LTTE received continuous flack for smuggling and forced recruitment (and child recruitment in particular).

In a letter to the prime minister on 21 April 2003, lead negotiator Balasingham announced the suspension of LTTE participation in the peace negotiations. Key reasons cited included a preliminary donor conference in Washington, DC (which the LTTE could not attend as a proscribed organisation under US law), the unaddressed military occupation of public and private Tamil property in the northeast and the tendency of the Wickremesinghe government to subsume welfare conditions in the northeast under a general vision of economic growth, rather than identifying the political causes underpinning the Tamil plight.²⁰

Balasingham's demonstrative protest has been well publicised. Less is known about what happened backstage at this important juncture. Our perusal of the confidential archives of the foreign ministry in Oslo²¹ suggests that the Norwegian team misread the LTTE's determination. The subsequent email from special envoy Solheim to Balasingham implies that the LTTE's stance was interpreted as tactical opposition that could be redressed with some extra measures. It starts with an upbeat 'Bala!' and then reads:

We have as you will know, studied your letter to the prime minister...
In your letter you are demanding that the [Sri Lankan] government

should do much more on implementation when it comes to resettlement of internally displaced and refugees, reconstruction of the Tamil areas and normalcy for the inhabitants of the north and east. The government recognise that a lot more should be done. They are not satisfied with the progress but want to enter into a dialogue, listening to your suggestions, before making new important decisions.²²

The email goes on to discuss the travel plans of government negotiator G. L. Peiris and Norwegian (deputy) ministers Vidar Helgesen and Jan Petersen to suggest tagging on a discussion with the LTTE. Balasingham's response three days later was curt:

Mr P [Prabhakaran] is firmly determined that the [Sri Lankan] government should take action to fulfil the obligation of the CFA [ceasefire agreement]. We are awaiting the Prime Minister Mr Ranil Wickramasinghe's reply to our letter.²³

If this was not clear to begin with, Balasingham's email to Solheim six weeks later left no space for doubt:

As you are aware, we are not very happy over the approaches and methods undertaken by the facilitators [the Norwegian team] to satisfy the expectations and interests of the international donor community thereby ignoring the complexity of the ground reality. Priority was given to human values, principles, guidelines, milestones and roadmaps to an imaginary final settlement in an unknown future rather than offering concrete solutions to concrete problems. The peace process was further complicated by intense internationalisation that effected a serious imbalance in partnership placing us at a serious disadvantageous position. As a state Sri Lanka was given all privileges and encouragements whereas the LTTE, even in its absence, was treated shabbily with warnings and threats that eroded our self-confidence. As you know, intense pressure will make the LTTE intransigent.²⁴

The underlying tensions of Norway's even-handedness were starting to become painfully apparent. The Norwegian team had engaged with the LTTE as a state-like actor without challenging its sovereign aspirations, but simultaneously it had assured the government that a separate Tamil state was 'out of the question'.²⁵ This ambiguity could not last. The Norwegians had designed a process that appeared to tilt in the LTTE's favour: the ceasefire enabled the movement to consolidate its control and they gained enormous political capital from their international performance as a state-like actor. But the process was embedded in a regional and global context that was dominated by the deep-seated state bias of the international system. The Indian government firmly opposed the LTTE being legitimised as part of any solution. More generally, the

pro-state reflexes of both Asian and Western governments were compounded by the anti-terrorist discourse that swept across the globe after the September 11 attacks in 2001 (directly in parallel to the peace talks). Even supposed soft powers like the European Union and Canada officially proscribed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation in 2006. In the early days of the ceasefire, the Norwegian experiment of parity was tolerated, but when the peace process lost momentum, it offered the LTTE no defence against regional and global pressures.

The movement continued presenting itself as a state in the making, but without the entourage of a promising international peace process these performative efforts lost credibility among its international audience. Half a year after suspending its participation in the talks, the LTTE unilaterally presented the contours of a transitional political framework, which clearly transgressed the bounds and biases of the international system: the proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA), a five-year transitional arrangement for the northeast with a governance structure that bordered on independence.²⁶ This document may be seen as the political terminus of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism. It embodied the legal conversion of the LTTE's *de facto* sovereign rule over people and territory into a formal and recognised form of self-government, and it marked the rejoining of the LTTE's trajectory of armed militancy with the older political trajectory of democratic campaigning and constitutional bargaining. As such, it comprised the culmination of the long history of wrecked power-sharing arrangements, Tamil nationalist contentions with the Sri Lankan constitution and violent insurgency. The ISGA was also a terminus of Tamil nationalist politics in the sense that it was a dead end. It did not result in any negotiations, let alone an agreement. The proposal sparked a political crisis, and the peace process, which had already been in dire straits for nearly a year by now, unravelled definitively.

The crisis over the ISGA proposal had rupturing consequences in all camps. For the UNP government of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe it was a political bombshell. And for the Norwegian government, it precipitated a crisis that spun beyond its mediation capacities. The release of the ISGA proposal prompted President Kumaratunga to declare a state of emergency and assume control over three key ministries, thus exploiting Wickremesinghe's feeble political position and effectively rendering his government impotent. Public dismay over the Norwegian-facilitated peace process gave Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism a firm electoral tail wind, which brought a hardline nationalist to power: Mahinda Rajapaksa (SLFP) was elected president.²⁷ His rise to power would fracture the traditional elites of both mainstream parties and would mark Sri Lanka's political trajectory for seventeen years to come. The LTTE also experienced the rupturing effects of the peace process when it suffered an unprecedented split. In March 2004, the LTTE's eastern commander Karuna defected from the northern-dominated movement. This drastic move, he claimed, was driven by

a difference of strategic perception between him and LTTE leader Prabhakaran (Sánchez-Meertens 2013). The Karuna split was quickly defeated by the LTTE, but it left the movement both weakened and emboldened in its military course.

Insurgent sovereign experiments that have successfully converted themselves into relatively stable (if largely unrecognised) states almost invariably enjoy the support of a powerful patron state, typically a regional hegemon. Examples include the republics in the former Soviet fringe (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria – all backed by Russia) and North Cyprus (backed by Turkey) (Caspersen 2012). The LTTE lacked such a patron. India had played this role in the 1980s for the Tamil militancy more widely, but after the LTTE turned its guns on the Indian military and killed Rajiv Gandhi, such recourse was permanently disabled. The Norwegian government presented itself as an honest, even-handed broker, but it was neither capable nor willing to counter-leverage the Sri Lankan state in order to preserve symmetry. The LTTE was remarkably effective in using the ceasefire to roll out an elaborate institutional architecture reminiscent of a state. It skilfully developed a level of international goodwill, and it had drafted a radical but credible proposal for political transition. These were necessary accomplishments for the LTTE in anticipation of a more recognised form of self-rule, but they were no defence when the process collapsed.

In fact, they arguably provoked additional concern, not least for the Indian government. India never openly opposed the peace effort, but the apparent appeasement of the LTTE raised alarm, our interviews in Delhi confirmed. ‘Norway gave the LTTE a certain legitimacy. We found that very uncomfortable,’ a former Indian foreign secretary told us. ‘The perception was that the Norwegians were becoming apologists for the LTTE’ – not because of personal sympathies but because of the approach of treating both sides even-handedly. The 2004 Lok Sabha elections compounded the Indian position. They brought Congress, the party of the Gandhis, back to power, cementing Delhi’s willingness to side with the Sri Lankan government. And it gave the main party of Tamil Nadu – the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a Congress ally – a stake in tempering controversy over Sri Lanka. When the war resumed in 2006, India firmly sided with the Sri Lankan government with support to naval operations, radar capacities and intelligence (Hariharan 2010).

Conclusion

The LTTE manifested itself as a *de facto* sovereign by exercising ‘discipline with impunity’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2005, 2006). It established a regime of discipline and a chain of authority over people and territory that did not yield to the Sri Lankan state. It also coerced the multifarious movement of

Tamil nationalism into a singular effort, with the movement as the ‘sole voice’ and its *talaivar* Prabhakaran as the ultimate sovereign referent. An array of LTTE departments popped up, each with their own offices, uniforms and letterheads. These institutions by and large resembled their analogues in the Sri Lankan state apparatus. As such, I have argued, they can be understood as sovereign mimicry (Bhabha 1994; Klem and Maunaguru 2017). The sovereign performance of the LTTE yielded institutions that were similar to those of its adversary, thus making them easily recognisable as the apparatus of government but also slightly different. The movement aspired to an institutional order that was no mere replica of the state but a superior version, a dress rehearsal (McConnell 2016) for a new glorified state to come.

This chapter also observed that there was a significant paradox in the LTTE’s sovereign experiment. On the one hand, the movement went to great lengths to present its rule as orderly and institutionalised, but on the other hand, it derived much of its power and enigma from being unpredictable and unknowable. The performative practices of governance did not cull its capricious potential. Alongside the bureaucratic trappings and codifications, the movement nurtured a powerful cult of violent dedication, sacrifice and martyrdom. One could never quite know what the LTTE was up to or what it was able to do. It had an elaborate system of regulations, but – much in line with the literature on sovereign violence (Gilmartin 2020; Hansen 2001; Klem and Maunaguru 2017; Spencer 2007) – LTTE rules could change, and the potential for violence never waned.

I have argued that the LTTE’s sovereign experiment in the 1990s and early 2000s did not comprise a clear-cut imposition of rule and a delineation of people and territory that severed all ties with the institutional landscape of the Sri Lankan state. On the contrary, it unfolded through fuzzy boundaries, institutional overlap and tactical restraint. Rather than enforcing exclusive loyalty and crisply demarcated boundaries, this process was characterised by the ambiguity of institutional bricolage, first within its own territory and then, with the ceasefire, in the international arena. The LTTE gradually co-opted institutions, and it connived the continued functioning of Sri Lankan government entities on its turf in overlap with the creation of its own state institutions.

This process of sovereign encroachment was manifest at the village level in Adivasipuram, where the RDS (originally a government rural outreach mechanism) was brought into the orbit of LTTE rule, while interactions with government officers and services also continued. In Sampur, the movement did not coerce the Vellala-dominated Hindu temple to abandon its strict caste and *kudi* hierarchies when the temple board demonstratively called off the annual temple festival. The LTTE exercised a similar form of restraint

towards government officers, most obviously the ward-level *grama niladaris* in LTTE-controlled areas, who continued to function as part of the government institutional hierarchy, with information, documents, decisions and a trickle of resources going back and forth across the front line. The LTTE's strategy of sovereign encroachment served a long-term objective of carving out a path towards an effective and recognised government: to gradually transform itself from an insurgency with some de facto institutions into a de facto state, then graduate into a state with de facto recognition and ultimately seek formal recognition. The Norwegian-facilitated peace process and the 2002 ceasefire agreement offered the LTTE an opportunity to convert its military parity with the government to an implied form of political parity and showcase its state-like posture.

Norway's even-handed, consensual approach to the 2000s peace process created the pretence of parity between the LTTE and the government. The Norwegians were prepared to facilitate the LTTE in consolidating its performance of sovereign mimicry and expanding this repertoire on the international stage. For the LTTE this was the crown on many years of gradual maturation as a de facto sovereign political structure. LTTE-controlled territory was formally acknowledged with a ceasefire agreement, and the governing institutions of Tamil Eelam were sprawling along the Kilinochchi main road. Meanwhile, LTTE negotiators travelled the globe in an official capacity and thrived on the implied endorsement of photoshoots, protocol and diplomatic networking.

International actors were no passive audience to the LTTE's conduct; they were part of the performative action. During the peace process, diplomats, aid workers and other foreign visitors, like me, were acting the part when they engaged with the unusual phenomenon of an insurgent state in the making, to see where the plot would take them. After the core political issues of the peace talks were tabled at the December 2002 Oslo meeting, the illusion of symmetry fizzled out, and when the movement unilaterally presented its own vision of a transitional political framework – the ISGA proposal – the underlying tensions and contradictions of the process were exposed. The legitimating teleology of an insurgency transforming itself into a peaceful political actor crumbled, and the LTTE's posturing could no longer mitigate the perception that they were violent insurgents, if not terrorists. Rather than dazzling international audiences with its sovereign performance, the LTTE had alarmed them. Re-assembling the repertoires of the Tamil nationalist movement, the LTTE set out to advance a comprehensive enactment of Tamil sovereignty, steeped in a Tamil *demos* and homeland, and a legal framework premised on the national right to self-determination. But political performativity, however vivacious, can unravel or assume different connotations when the setting or the audience changes.

The line between validating performance and farce became thin for the LTTE's sovereign experiment when the peace talks petered out. The movement had no recourse to the counter-leverage of a patron state. The Norwegians had been prepared to artificially level the playing field for talks, but they were neither willing nor able to neutralise the growing international pressure on the LTTE.

Notes

- 1 Named after the political patron who enabled its construction, the renowned Muslim leader Abdul Majeed from neighbouring Kinniya (a member of parliament on an SLFP ticket from 1960 to 1977).
- 2 For a detailed discussion about the significance of knowledge and intimacy around LTTE surveillance, the sense of belonging instilled by 'being in the know', and the preoccupation with traitors, see S. Thiranagama (2010).
- 3 Other exceptions were S. P. Tamilselvan (who headed the Political Wing in the 2000s and used to have a nom de guerre earlier: Dinesh) and Anton Balasingham (the LTTE 'ideologue' and negotiator).
- 4 Agamben (2005) raises the German term *Führertum* in his discussion of the paradox between two forms of authority in Roman law: *potestas* (legal authority) and *auctoritas* (the more fundamental capacity of conferring such legal authority: the authority to generate legal validity). *Auctoritas* thus resembles the ability to bootstrap the law into being (Brilmayer 1989), and as such, it is closely related to the sovereign capacity of suspending or (re-)enacting law, including the ability to place a person within or outside of the law. The two forms of authority are a binary pair, Agamben observes, but they may converge in one institution or person as is the case with the notion *Führertum*, a concept associated with the Nazi adulation of Adolf Hitler, as the ultimate sovereign referent. When the state of exception that binds *potestas* and *auctoritas* together becomes the norm, Agamben posits, the juridico-political system effectively becomes 'a killing machine' (Agamben 2005: 86).
- 5 There are fascinating parallels here to Abimael Guzmán, the former leader of Sendero Luminoso (the Communist Party of Peru – Shining Path). Degregori (2012) conceptualises Guzmán as a 'cosmocrat', a figure that mixes the repertoires of science, Catholicism, communism and fuses the qualities of an oracle and a martial leader capable of inflicting violence.
- 6 This violence arguably targeted the more intimate figure of a guardian that betrays its duties, a view that resonates with Thiranagama's argument that the figure of the traitor is defined by intimacy: it is intimate knowledge that spells danger, so the renegeing of intimate actors is seen to warrant especially violent measures (S. Thiranagama 2010).

- 7 A small fragment of the material used in Klem and Maunaguru (2018) informs this section as well. The two paragraphs ‘I never saw ... recruit cadres by proxy’ comprise an edited version of the corresponding paragraphs in Klem and Maunaguru (2018: 797).
- 8 Though the Veddahs are classified as a very small separate ethnic group, they were considered Tamil in Adivasipuram. Brow (1996) argues that Veddahs are best referred to as a *variga* (kind), somewhere between a caste group and an ethnic group at the fringes of both the Tamil and the Sinhala community.
- 9 Some *kudis* were added in subsequent years, but resistance remains.
- 10 Norwegian involvement has a much longer history than is generally assumed. It in fact dates back to the immediate aftermath of India’s military and diplomatic withdrawal. First Norwegian overtures occurred when a well-connected Norwegian and long-time resident of Sri Lanka by the name of Arne Fjørtoft sent out feelers, partly inspired by Norway’s growing peace activism in other parts of the world. The Norwegian government first offered its services to help facilitate peace on 22 January 1991 (MFA archives Oslo: 307. 30/442, 1996/01182, 55–72, Letter from foreign minister Godal to Solheim, 3 June 1996). During the peace talks of the mid-1990s, the conflict parties agreed on an international monitoring mission of which Norway was a part, but the process collapsed before the mission was fielded. The Norwegian government continued to make overtures, and the embassy in Colombo was given a more active role – a departure from Norway’s standard approach of using proxies. Norwegian diplomats held exploratory meetings with government and opposition in Colombo, but felt they lacked a ‘real contact’ point with the LTTE (MFA archives Oslo: MFA. 302. 77 [1998/04913–4], Colombo to Oslo, 21 September 1998). In May 1999, Kumaratunga officially issued a secret request to the Norwegian government inviting them to facilitate a peace process.
- 11 It has been argued that the LTTE made a strategic shift due to the drastic changes in global security dynamics (Gunaratna 2003; Saravanamuttu 2003), and it is true that the truce followed shortly after the 11 September 2001 Al Qaida attacks and the declaration of the so-called global war on terror. However, the LTTE’s positioning in relation to the peace process predated this shift.
- 12 For example, foreign donors seeking to work in LTTE-controlled areas without formally supporting the LTTE found a convenient go-between in the bodies of the state that continued to function in LTTE areas, including the provincial council. In a similar vein, they engaged with the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation, an outfit of the Tamil diaspora (though they eschewed direct funding). Officially an international NGO like so many others, it was well known that the organisation was in fact a diaspora-associated appendage of the LTTE. By not openly claiming control over the organisation, the LTTE was not only able to attract benefits for the population but also lent credence to the fact that it was tolerant enough to have something resembling a civil society in Tamil Eelam.

- 13 This confidential Norwegian document of 2000 envisaged a sequence starting with a ceasefire to establish stability, followed by normalisation, aid programmes and interim measures to bolster confidence, to then finally establish a conducive constellation for an overall peace agreement. This confidential plan envisioned monthly meetings between the parties, which would be underpinned by a ceasefire and bolstered by an international group of friends whose development aid would lubricate the process. Within six months, the parties would present a proposal for an interim solution and a timeline for future negotiations (MFA archives Oslo: 307.3 [2000/00522-36], MFA to Colombo, 20 September 2000). The 2002–2003 process (after circumventing President Kumaratunga) adhered to this game plan almost literally – except it did not end as planned.
- 14 When Kumaratunga's peace overtures balked – with the LTTE attacking her with a suicide bomber (1999) and regaining territory (2000), the UNP scuttling her devolution proposal (2000) and her losing control of parliament (2001) – Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim zealously tried to break the gridlock by reaching out to the opposition and international actors. This elicited major irritation from Kumaratunga – especially his plea to the US government to pressure the Sri Lankan government to de-proscribe the LTTE (MFA archives Oslo: 307. 3 [2001/00612-51], Minutes from meeting between Solheim, Westborg, Tromsdal, Kumaratunga and Kadirgamar, 30 April 2001). When we interviewed Kumaratunga (London, 5 June 2011), she commented 'Solheim was ambitious and he made some mistakes.... A negotiator should melt into the walls. Disappear when the parties come to an agreement. He was not like that. He always had a one-upmanship.... He always wanted to be one up to the government.' In response to this perceived over-assertiveness, Kumaratunga called on the Norwegian government to remove Solheim from his role. He stayed on board, but the Norwegians were forced to reshuffle their team.
- 15 Full text available in Edrisinha et al. (2008: 646–648) and on many online repositories. See also Balasingham (2004: 405).
- 16 The academic work on the peace process and its architecture is formidable (Goodhand, Korf and Spencer 2011; Rupesinghe 2006; Stokke 2010; Stokke and Uyangoda 2011; Venugopal 2018; Wickramasinghe 2006; Winslow and Woost 2004). There is an even larger body of applied research in connection to the process (including reports by Centre for Policy Alternatives, Foundation for Coexistence, Berghof Foundation, International Crisis Group, as well as many donor-funded consultancy reports) and a small collection of memoirs (Balasingham 2004; Fernando 2008; Gooneratne 2007; Thamizhini 2021; Weerakoon 2004).
- 17 There had in fact been some 'mediator shopping'. In the late 1990s onwards, Canada, the Netherlands, the UK, the Commonwealth, the Catholic Church, civil society organisations and several other actors had been offering their services in one way or the other – in Kumaratunga's words, 'they were falling over each

other' (interview in London, 5 June 2011). The Norwegian government was agreeable to both sides as a state actor (considered essential by the LTTE) but not a major power with a direct stake in Sri Lanka (unlike India) and not a power with leverage against the government (a condition for the Kumaratunga administration). After correspondence with the LTTE, Kumaratunga covertly invited the Norwegian government to facilitate a peace process.

- 18 MFA archives in Oslo: 307. 30/1997/02601, 1–15, 5, Memo, 3 July 1997.
- 19 In follow-up to the discussions on federalism at the Oslo meeting, the government proposed a provincial administrative council, as an interim arrangement towards constitutional power-sharing and alongside the existing provincial council (North-Eastern Provincial Council, or NEPC). While this setup would give the LTTE seats without having to stand for elections, the legal status of the proposed council was unclear, and its mandate excluded security, policing, land, tax revenue and law-making capacity (Edrisinha et al. 2008: 650–661). In parallel, there had been several initiatives towards informal forms of collaboration on humanitarian and rehabilitation issues (and more were to follow after the December 2004 tsunami), but the funding for such mechanisms flowed through channels in Colombo and could thus be turned off like a tap.
- 20 Letter from Balasingham to Wickremesinghe, cited in full in Balasingham (2004: 434–439).
- 21 As mentioned in the first note of the chapter, this archival research was part of a commissioned evaluation of Norwegian peace efforts. One member of our team, Ada Nissen, studied these archives, made summaries and detailed translations of key fragments. The quotations used in this chapter are taken from these excerpts and translations.
- 22 MFA archives in Oslo: 307. 3 (2003/00027-218), Solheim to Balasingham, 23 April 2003.
- 23 MFA archives in Oslo: 307. 3 (2003/00027-218), Balasingham to Solheim, 26 April 2003.
- 24 MFA archives in Oslo: 307. 3 (2003/00027.221), Balasingham to Solheim, 16 June 2003.
- 25 One of Norway's most senior diplomats gave the Sri Lankan minister of foreign affairs Kadirgamar this assurance during their first encounters in 1998–1999 (interview, 9 December 2010).
- 26 The text of this document is widely available (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interim_Self_Governing_Authority [accessed 6 December 2023]). For an LTTE perspective on this, see Balasingham (2004: 450–465). For a critical constitutional appraisal, see Edrisinha and Welikala (2008). The ISGA was to have 'plenary power' over northeastern Sri Lanka, including over revenue, budgetary authority (and the ability to attract donors, investors and lenders), law and order, and control over land as well as marine and offshore resources.

LTTE representatives would have an absolute majority until the interim period expired and elections were to be held. The proposal was notably mute on the relationship with the legal, political and administrative structure of the rest of Sri Lanka. There was no mention of power-sharing or a federal framework. Instead, the proposal underlined the 'parity of status' between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government and envisioned a tribunal to settle disputes, with a composition that would ultimately be adjudicated by the International Court of Justice (Edrisinha and Welikala 2008; Edrisinha et al. 2008: 662–675).

- 27 While this electoral backlash to the peace process was evident, it may be argued that Mahinda's election was also precipitated by an LTTE-enforced Tamil boycott of the polls.