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# Performing nationalism: The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic politics in Switzerland

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## Abstract

The history of post-war Sri Lanka has seen an escalation of nationalisms that constantly collide. Post-2009, with the end of the war, the reproduction of narratives around nationalisms has become intense, with home-grown protests for accountability of minority injustices continuing to sustain its fervour over time. Within the context of Switzerland these events in Sri Lanka are invariably aligned with diasporic engagement. Dominant spaces such as the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, Switzerland become transnational sites for the performance of long-distance nationalism by Tamil diaspora groups, raising questions around legitimacy and claims-making. This paper presents empirical insights as to how long-distance Tamil nationalism is manifested as political engagement, by groups, and/ or individuals, in formal and informal transnational sites within the socio-political landscape of Switzerland. It argues that modes of political engagement are manifested through rituals of performance and performativity such as scripting and iteration of claims-making processes that enable legitimacy in transnational sites of lobby and protest within the UN arena in Geneva during the Human Rights Council (HRC) sessions. The paper situates its analysis within a shift in post-war Tamil diaspora claims-making narratives from a separatist stance to that of victimhood and human rights producing narratives that present the Tamil diaspora as a singular actor albeit with complex heterogeneity.

## KEYWORDS

claims-making, long-distance nationalism, performance, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Tamil diaspora

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

“We are neither a warrior group, nor an armed group or a violence-based group. We have been an organised movement defending the Tamils against the violence faced by government-sponsored groups, and against state terrorism” (Rutnam, 2018, n.p.) read the statement released on the internet in the midst of what was hoped to be the onset of “peaceful times,”

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subsequent to the end of the war in 2009 and the change of the Rajapakse regime in 2015. The press release of the newly formed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) claimed Switzerland as its home base. Ravi<sup>1</sup> formally a youth activist attached to the Tamil Youth Organisation (TYO), the youth wing of the LTTE upheld that the actions of the LTTE were justified due to its vision of self-determination for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. The story of Ravi, central to this paper, points at a shift in the claims-making position of Tamil diaspora groups from that of a separatist one to a victim-centric human rights outlook, performed within the micro-spaces of the UN. This raises the question around causative factors of this shift – are they prompted by particular events, a generational inclination perhaps, or a cynical change in strategy?

The aim of this paper is to add empirical insight into how Tamil diaspora actors manifest post-war political engagement using claims-making processes and legitimacy, through performative practices in selected transnational spaces in Switzerland. The distinct patterns of Tamil diaspora politics in Switzerland, shaped by the LTTE's monopoly over the community during wartimes to advance the vision of self-determination, through socio-cultural spaces such as temples, Tamil language schools, and so on began to change after the end of the war. This change became evident through the actions of diaspora actors, where the primary function of the Swiss Tamil diaspora as fundraisers for the war in Sri Lanka ceased, and lobbying in the corridors and other sites of the UN in Geneva became a priority. This shift in strategy was necessary to sustain claims-making efforts in the post-war context to achieve self-determination and is the point of departure for this paper.

In this paper, firstly, I examine transnational *sites* such as the UN during the Human Rights Council sessions, within the physical space of the UN building and in the more open space of the Place des Nations in Geneva as dominant sites for the performative engagement of Tamil diaspora politics in Switzerland and linked transnationally. Secondly, I explore the *modes of political engagement* manifested through rituals of performance and performativity such as *scripting and iteration* of claims-making processes that enable legitimacy. I do so by looking at the role of political actors and how they negotiate micro-political practices such as political lobbying and protesting within the UN sites. As a geopolitical space the UN has been viewed as a “formal” site directed by elite actors and institutions, albeit an increasing focus on critical geopolitical practices on the everyday, the embodied, and the intimate (McConnell, 2020). Through this I also argue that the post-war shift in the narrative of the Tamil diaspora from separatist to that of victimhood and human rights also projects the Tamil diaspora as a singular actor even though they are representationally heterogeneous.

In order to address these questions I look at meetings, side events and protests organised by Tamil diaspora actor groups. This highlights how these actors negotiate sites related to the UN in Geneva as geopolitical meeting and event spaces where representations are made, rituals performed, and practices documented. I approach the spatial politics of the Tamil diaspora using a geographical lens drawing on the concept of transnationalism, particularly in understanding transnational spaces or sites. A socio-anthropological framing of performance and performativity contributes to this approach, enabling the analysis of how Tamil diaspora actors manifest political action in relation to claims-making processes.

The research is based primarily on observations made during the 40th UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) sessions held from 25 February to 22 March 2019, particularly the general sessions and key side events organised by Movement X during this period, and are supplemented by 16 episodic in-depth interviews with key experts in Switzerland and Sri Lanka. These interviews include perspectives from diaspora activists, members of Tamil diaspora organisations, experts on migration issues, officials of Swiss governmental departments, and political analysts in Sri Lanka. Nine narrative engagement history interviews with four diaspora Tamils who were part of Movement X and those who had actively engaged with members of the group in diasporic political activism were also conducted. This empirical research is supported by analysis of texts generated by documenting and transcribing video reportage in Tamil from online social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter since October 2017. The research was part of a Swiss National Science Foundation research project on the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland that began in May 2017. Interviews for this research were held both in Tamil and English.

An ethnographic approach was used to document the everyday experiences of actors using in-depth interviews (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990) and ongoing observation (Jacob, 1987). As a member of the Tamil diaspora my role as an “insider-outsider” (Halstead, 2001) follows a critical or new ethnographical stance. To study spaces such as the UN and the different sites the events took place in, the need to use a multi-sited ethnographic method was important to help circumvent methodological challenges. The production of a rich source of primary data was achieved by studying the various multi-sitedness of the side events and parallel events, thereby enabling a geographical spatial de-centredness (Falzon, 2009). This paper also builds on the methodological insights of looking at meetings as field sites (Brosius & Campbell, 2010) and as multi-sited ethnography of events that enable us to understand practices (Baird, 2017).

I gained access to the 40th UNHRC sessions as an academic, but the challenge of keeping up with constantly rescheduled side events was daunting. I refer here to the basic methodological problems of studying events ethnographically, particularly in predicting the time of the event (van Dooremalen, 2017). Being constantly in contact with an international campaign organisation helped me to receive updated side-events lists that were not otherwise published online. I was also able to arrange for a special pass for the side events through this contact. Observations were made inside the meeting rooms where side events were held, usually seated as an observer and in some instances actively clarifying during Q&A. I was also able to observe during the informal chats that took place in the waiting areas and corridors. I introduced myself and engaged in light conversation during which I was able to observe how various Tamil diaspora actors communicated with each other and the wary discomfort of these actors in the presence of Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) officials. Contacts for the narrative engagement interviews and in-depth interviews with experts were secured through personal and professional contacts from my networks. Any biases that could arise due to using “insider” contacts were triangulated during expert interviews.

In the next section, I discuss some key scholarship on transnationalism linked to long-distance nationalism, for contextual insight into the spatial politics of Tamil diaspora groups' continued engagement with claims-making processes vis à vis self-determination. Subsequently, I present empirical insights compiled from UNHRC sessions and narrative engagement history interviews analysing the performativity of Tamil diaspora actors' political engagement aimed at ensuring legitimacy both internally as well as externally. I close by revisiting how transnational sites are used to enable and sustain political linkages through diasporic action, as well as present briefly new areas of development relating to informal spatial practices of long-distance nationalism.

## 2 | TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES AND LONG-DISTANCE NATIONALISM

The concept of transnationalism defined as multiple ties and interactions linking people and institutions beyond the borders of nation-states enables a better understanding of transnational linkages and its determinants. Transnationalism has been discussed as an interdisciplinary concept in several study fields, including anthropology (Mügge et al., 2016; Waldinger, 2013), geography (Yeoh et al., 1999), and ethnic studies (Dahinden, 2017; Gowricharn, 2009). Its focus lies in examining the movement of individuals and civil society across borders (Kearney, 1995; Peck, 2020) where such movements are influenced by heightened global connectedness. Transnationalism includes different actors such as individuals, civil society, organisations and networks beyond the boundaries of the nation-state (Bauböck & Faist, 2010).

The conceptualisation of transnationalism as linkages between home and host land, understood as a single social field (Schiller et al., 1995), is interconnected to the alternating relations of migrants (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). It is noteworthy that the homeland versus hostland dichotomy is a construct that needs to be challenged (Orjuela, 2017; Pande, 2017). Typologies of transnational flows also help compare different transnational communities and their links to transnational spaces (Landolt et al., 1999; Pries, 2001). Migrant perception of meaningful forms of political membership further enables a better understanding of power relations (Landolt, 2008) along with adaptation processes, such as integration of migrants in countries of residence (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). On the other hand, transnational actors' increasing linkages with their country of origin is further influenced by rejection factors in their countries of residence, thereby creating rejection-based transnationalism (Beauchemin & Safi, 2020). While the parameters for rejection are often complex, it is an interesting aspect to also consider in terms of diaspora actors who become more inclined towards sustaining transnational political ties.

Anderson discusses the phenomenon of a “politically imagined community” (2006, p. 6) that transnationally contends with the same complexities as people circulating within their country of origin. Nationalism tied intrinsically to the nation-state characteristically aims at seizing control while simultaneously becoming reactionary against interference or expansion, generally instrumentalised through the support or rejection of legitimacy (Conversi, 1995). Similarly diasporas engage in long-distance nationalism to support or reject nationalist projects in their countries of origin. Long-distance nationalism became more relevant as involuntary migration and the emergence of diaspora groups increased over the years. Therefore, understanding the characteristics and composition of diasporas merely as bounded entities contradicts the notion that such groups are heterogeneous, especially since not all the members adopt a diasporic stance (Brubaker, 2005).

Foregrounding heterogeneity would enable scholars to study these diasporic groups empirically and understand the various dispositions of its membership, as it is possible with regards to nationalist projects. This presents a compelling case to think of diaspora “as an idiom, a stance, a claim” and as a category of practice before considering it as a category of

analysis (Brubaker, 2005, pp. 12–13). Diasporas are not merely constituted by consciousness and imagination, and as with identity groups the focus should also be placed on institutions and agents that play a key role in producing these aspects (Kleist, 2008; Sökefeld & Schwalgin, 2000). These institutions and agents are either part of the diasporic population or they may be “speaking in the name of the putative homeland state” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 12). Similarly, the Tamil diaspora contends with a narrative that presents it as a singular actor when the reality is more complex.

The process of keeping such nationalist projects alive for actors such as the Tamil diaspora through “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson, 1992; Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001) is one strongly linking “capitalist order, mass migration and mass communications” (Skrbiš, 1999, pp. 6–7). It is a process of playing identity politics in the conflicts of the imagined homeland, an interaction that the diaspora actor is not answerable to, but due to political manipulations in their country of origin they sometimes become vulnerable to it (Anderson, 1992). While the idea of a Tamil homeland originated from Sri Lanka, the Tamil diaspora have imaginatively projected it as an aspiration of the Northern Tamils that is built around their migration trajectory (Thiranagama, 2014).

This paper focuses on the “performance” of such long-distance Tamil nationalism and unpacks diasporic identifications staged in certain transnational sites that influence the shaping of political actions, contributing to the narrative of the singular and unified actor (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 2008; Vimalarajah et al., 2011). It adds to scholarly work that challenges this notion, arguing for the need to look at how Tamil diasporas are made into specific kinds of actors (Thiranagama, 2014). In the post-war context diaspora groups that uphold the legacy of the LTTE have shifted their anti-human rights outlook to one that upholds human rights with a vision of self-determination.

The Swiss case illustrates changing strategies and processes in terms of claims-making that has gained momentum as well as the intended effect of this strategic shift. Particularly, it questions whether it is an attempt to reinforce the Tamil diaspora in relation to homeland politics or whether it is a careful attempt towards creating a tangible archive and documentation base to advance the case in garnering support of the internationals for a more complex self-determination project. I do so by examining UN sites as transnational political spaces and explore how institutionalised structures shape political engagement within Switzerland; referenced by Tamil diaspora actors as a “democratic space” due to Swiss political customs, such as direct democracy and the federal model of governance. I first briefly analyse the conceptual frame of performance and performativity in the next section.

### 3 | SETTING THE STAGE

Transnational social spaces such as UN sites discussed in this paper are extremely significant as a platform for expressing identity and agency, and can be described as a space for performative articulation of power. Performance or “the acting out,” and performativity understood as “... reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 2) help us to understand the manifestation of modes of engagement in spaces that are inherently political, especially in the transnational context. They reproduce and/or subvert discourses that facilitate or restrict subjects (Gregson & Rose, 2000). This provides a suitable framework to unpack the complex political projects of diaspora groups. Human geography scholarship over the years has focused on performativity, particularly through four thematic areas such as feminist and queer geographies of subjectivity and identity (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014; Kuus, 2007; Schurr, 2013), non-representational theories of embodiment (Spry, 2006), post-structuralist approaches to political economy, performance and the social production as well as contestation of political spaces (Gurchathen et al., 2018; Jerne, 2016; McConnell, 2020; Rai, 2014). These thematic areas have not developed in isolation and lend different understandings and contrasts to epistemological, ontological and political commitments.

While performance denotes the action, the rituals and conscious acts pertaining to “being,” performativity deals with the process of becoming, through repetitive “doing.”<sup>2</sup> Critical theory of political performativity that questions the “sovereign performative” is a central focus of Butler’s re-working of Austin’s “speech act theory” and has become an essential element in theorising spatial politics of performativity in geography (Butler, 1997; Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014). I understand Butler’s re-working of Austin’s “speech act theory” as essential in understanding how the Tamil diaspora manifests modes of engagement *vis à vis* political and ideological agendas in a transnational social space (Butler, 1997; Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014). Together with Butler, Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of performance looks at how spaces and places are linked to shaping social action, and how space is animated through performances as articulations of power (Gregson & Rose, 2000). Goffman uses the analogy of a stage play to explain human social interaction that changes according to situations. He refers to the space or site of social action as the stage (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014; Goffman, 1956, 1963). In the case of Ravi and Movement X,<sup>3</sup> Goffman’s dramaturgical concept of performance, his analogy of a stage play in



analysing the identifications of the performer, and the complexity of the audiences within as well as outside the premises of the UN provide a vital framework in understanding the dynamics of the Tamil nationalist political project.

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis approach argues that time, place and audience influence elements of human interaction and thereby the study of interaction order (Glass & Rose-Redwood, 2014; Goffman, 1956, 1963). The stage is used to explain how human social interaction can be altered depending on a situation. When one comes into contact with another, interactions are altered by the audience's expectations and as in a theatrical performance we are then placed on a stage that has a "front," staging positive elements of our idea of self, and a backstage to prepare for our role. While Goffman sets the framework in understanding the *performer*, the *stage* and the *audience* Butler delves deeper into how discursive performativity creates a *ritual* chain and through various *speech acts* of *iterative* nature gives words a sense of power. She questions the power attributed to speech so that speech is figured as having the power to constitute the subject (Butler, 1997). Further, Butler states that an "act" is not momentary but one that transcends temporal horizons condensing iterability beyond just a moment, highlighting that speech acts are politically implemented as a social ritual (Butler, 1997). Butler builds on Bourdieu to posit further that interpellation of actors' function as a result of iteration is linked to the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) of the subject. She notes that there is a connect between performativity and habitus rooted in the process of ritualisation, and that Bourdieu discusses how the actors display an "unconscious knowingness" where the body, its gestures and stylistics contribute towards a certain social reality (Butler, 1997, p. 210).

Butler discusses how societal norms influence an individual in both intentional and non-intentional ways, where the habitus becomes a process of ritual internalisation that could be confronted and challenged, obeyed and resisted, which is one point where she actually contradicts with Bourdieu (Butler, 1997, p. 12). Through performativity a person can confront norms or practices that were reinforced on them since they create bodily speech as an outcome of habitus. These norms force bodily speech to obey rules, but bodily speech can find ways to resist them. To Butler discourse is varied and contradictory but creates particular effects as a manifestation of power that both disciplines and transforms the actor (Gregson & Rose, 2000).

In the following section, I argue that the "performance" of Ravi, leading Movement X, navigates the space of the UN enabling a process of claims-making, carefully documenting a journey enabling legitimacy through intra-national as well as transnational networks. The paper highlights the different moments of "performativity" that are manifested in sites of the UNHRC as iterative speech acts and rituals. It presents the inter-connectedness of performance, performativity and spatialities in a complex engagement with "the performative."

#### 4 | THE UN AS A SITE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: HUMAN RIGHTS, SELF-DETERMINATION AND LEGITIMACY

The "Broken Chair" at Place des Nations in Geneva stands tall, as rows of people gather with bright red flags watching a man speak on a stage overshadowed by two large cut-outs of Prabhakaran, the slain leader of the LTTE (see Figure 1). The Place des Nations at the entrance of the UN premises in Geneva is a popular protest site and is a symbolically politicised informal space. To coincide with the UNHRC sessions in Geneva, busloads of Tamil diaspora from different parts of Europe have come to protest against the GoSL and to direct the gaze of the internationals. In March 2019 during the UNHRC sessions a performance of Tamil nationalism unravelled at the Place des Nations, complete with roughly put up exhibition stalls lined with posters depicting scenes of the brutal end of the war. Large tall men in uniform form a partial barricade towards the end of the group and have "Tamil Guard" printed on their uniforms with Taser guns clipped to their belts. Performance sites within the premises of the UN as well as outside come alive in order to sustain the question of justice and accountability in the international arena with regards to the injustices against Sri Lankan Tamils stretching beyond the 30 years of violent conflict. This illustrates how Tamil nationalism is manifested through routinised formal and informal activities as modes of engagement, by organisations and/or by individuals, within the socio-political landscape of Switzerland. In this section, while drawing reference to performance and performativity, I highlight how diaspora politics unfolds as routinised speech acts that are scripted and performed (Fall, 2020; Weisser, 2014) within the formal space of the UN and the informal protest space nearby.

While the UN as a humanitarian institution upholds the rights of the global peoples, within the human rights ethical project it is clearly regulated within a legal regime governed by texts, procedures and committees. Further, Moyn argues that self-determination is not a human right, although since the 1940s UN institutions have considered it to be one (Weitz, 2013). The practical efficacy of human rights interventions is something that has over the years been questioned



**FIGURE 1** The broken chair at the place des Nations Geneva, LTTE Protest during the 40th HRC sessions, March 2019

*Source:* Author

and discussed: some believe that these doubts have steered human rights practitioners to constantly try new avenues (Kelly, 2011), others consider the promised liberation by proponents of rights to be a form of imperialist or colonial domination (Alston, 2013), that human rights is “systematic ineffectiveness” (Hopgood, 2013, p. 7) and that it has been unable to better the well-being of people (Posner, 2014). Many pro-nationalist Tamil groups have considered the UN as an instrument that could affect change on questions of accountability and self-determination, a belief shared by many social movements and civil society organisations around the world, as evident in terms of the rights of the indigenous peoples (Hays & Bellier, 2017; Mueller, 2018; Weitz, 2013).

The relationship of diaspora politics through transnational activism on nation-building and nation-making processes beyond territorial bounds is also closely connected to legitimacy within the larger rubric of the human rights agenda. This is pertinent since the UN as the overarching governing body of the human rights agenda has increasingly become an arena for actors to lobby for legitimacy. Evidenced during meetings of international organisations and civil society networks, “spectacles [are] orchestrated to enact political strategies” (Mueller, 2018, p. 6). Performances are unveiled, for example, during the Universal Periodic Review that includes among others the HRC (Cowan & Billaud, 2015). It is a platform for NGOs to interact and present recommendations that promote and protect human rights.

## 5 | THE STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy becomes key for transnational and diaspora groups as part of the global civil society because it carries the potential to enable positive impacts on international and domestic politics beyond the ballot box sense (Anderson, 2011). It also becomes a tool to support the democratisation of legacies that were built around violence and internal discrimination as it is in the case of the LTTE. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), as an influential Tamil political coalition in Sri Lanka, proclaimed the establishment of a separate state for the Tamil people “based on the right of self-determination” as part of the Vaddukoddai Resolution passed in 1976. While this did establish the claim for self-determination, it was more of a call for ethnic solidarity as opposed to secession. The legal jurisdiction of Sri Lanka denies

claims to secessionist or external self-determination, but acknowledges the right to internal self-determination of the Tamil peoples within its constitutional provisions (Ashokbharan, 2019). The collusion between the state and Tamil youth set off by several events of communal violence culminating in the anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983 saw the emergence of the LTTE fighting for a separate state of Tamil Eelam after violently decimating other Tamil militant groups. The LTTE, as the dominant party to the conflict through populism and fear tactics, claimed sole representation of the Tamil peoples. This presumption was steered by the support of the people of the North East in 1976 and subsequently by the Tamil National Alliance's (TNA) 2004 election victory. In its manifesto, the TNA claimed the LTTE as the sole and authentic representatives of the Tamil people (McConnell, 2008).

As the war escalated in Sri Lanka, a group of academics from the University of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka came together to produce the Broken Palmyra in 1987. This was an important record of the conflict, documenting human rights abuses and violence perpetrated by different parties. As a result of this process, the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) was established to do the remarkable but difficult job of exposing perpetrators from all sides, even after the untimely demise of member Rajani Thiranagama by the LTTE. From its inception, the UTHR has avoided accountability on many counts, something that pro-nationalist groups including the global Tamil diaspora have been blind to. Human rights did not factor into their pre-war narratives.

Similarly, the LTTE has functioned in the diasporic space as a “*mobilising structure* that has managed to construct a common interpretive *frame* for a heterogeneous and diverse set of migrant experiences” (Thiranagama, 2014, p. 271, emphasis in original). Recent attempts to draft the third republican constitution in Sri Lanka have faced growing opposition and practical efforts at pushing for internal self-determination has proven unsuccessful. Debates around secession movements around the world, for example in Kosova and Catalonia, highlight challenges related to issues such as external legitimacy through international recognition and counter-secession movements, while ethno-national wars for independence are considered a primary threat to international peace (Muro & Woertz, 2017).

The question of legitimacy with regards to the post-war emergence of “representatives” of the LTTE and their journey towards an alternative political reality must also be looked at by approaching diasporas as a “category of practice” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 12). Post-war infighting among pro-LTTE groups vying for the remnants of stashed finances and leadership within the diaspora created a need to construct their own legitimacy (Walton, 2015). This is in line with how surviving rebel groups of intrastate wars sought legitimacy through civilian populations they claim to represent, from within their movement and from above, particularly the international community (Péclard & Mechoulam, 2015). This creates diverse groups with diverse interests within the Tamil diaspora impacted by the history of exile and realities of the country of residence, but is ideologically projected as a singular actor. Kinnvall and Petersson (2010) refer to diaspora groups as transnational actors (TNAs), noting that these TNAs could be both democratic and undemocratic with regards to their politics; therefore the question of democratic representation and legitimacy is a critical point of contention. This is further entangled with the aspirations of the Tamils living in Sri Lanka and the mainstream political groups they are aligned to. Legitimacy as a social construct with divergent interests and worldviews enables multiple claims perceived to be legitimate, creating further divisions (Kinnvall & Petersson, 2010). Likewise for the Tamils, claims-making processes create room for further contestation, which complicates legitimacy claims both on an internal as well as an external level (Walton, 2015), and is impacted by the continuous failure of minority protection in Sri Lanka.

## 6 | STAGING NATIONALISM

Sri Lankan Tamils left the island during various stages of the violent civil war in Sri Lanka and in the nineteenth century arrived at the British crown colonies of British Malaya and Singapore seeking economic opportunities. The 1983 pogrom in Sri Lanka that marked the beginning of the protracted conflict resulted in the first largest involuntary migration of Sri Lankan Tamils, with more than 1 million people living globally (Sriskandarajah, 2005). While diaspora groups remain closely networked, they are politically, socially and economically heterogeneous, impacted by time, reason and form of migration, as well as caste, class, gender and regional differences (Hollenbach et al., 2020; Vimalarajah et al., 2011). They are prominently known for financing the LTTE and contributing towards the creation of a separatist socio-political movement in the diasporic space (Amarasingam, 2013).

Tamils are one of the biggest diaspora groups in Switzerland known for their hard-working nature but also as passionate supporters of the separatist cause (Moret et al., 2007). Currently, there are approximately 55,463 people of Sri Lankan origin residing in Switzerland (BFS, 2020a, 2020b). The majority of Tamils in Switzerland are conflict-generated migrants who came during different migration phases, such as the early 1980s and early 1990s.



The second-generation Tamil youth also play an ambiguous role in terms of political activism and are firmly bound to Switzerland (Hess & Korf, 2014).

Increasing anti-Muslim sentiments by Sinhalese religious fundamentalists, home-grown protests demanding accountability for protracted injustices against minority Tamils after 2017 organised by families of the disappeared in northern Sri Lanka, and protests demanding the return of military occupied lands were key post-war events. These events highlight a degenerating state of the rule of law and good governance in Sri Lanka, setting off reactionary protests that continue to influence the performance of Tamil nationalism by diaspora groups in Switzerland. Interestingly, these performances are not conducted in an ad hoc manner; on the contrary, they are carefully planned, coordinated and routinised acts to amplify such issues within the arena of the UNHRC in Geneva, and to ward off counter-performances by the GoSL (Field notes, Geneva, 2018; Interviews with R and E, Zurich, 2018/2019).

Movement X was established in 2017 and over the past few years has built a collective of Tamils based in Switzerland linked with other diaspora groups in Europe, the UK, Canada and Australia. Their visibility as a group became public only towards the end of 2017 with activities heightening around the 39<sup>th</sup> UNHRC sessions in October 2018. Movement X is led by Ravi, who arrived in Switzerland in 2003 as an asylum seeker and claims to have also established a “Permanent representation for Tamil Eelam” in Geneva with hopes for one in Brussels soon. It has been granted the United National Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Consultative status<sup>4</sup> with the UN and the progress of the organisation is assessed through quadrennial reports. The organisation networks with activists/NGOs working on conflicts in Catalonia, Kurdistan and Western Sahara. Furthermore, the language that is utilised by this movement is rooted in human rights and international humanitarian law similar to the case of the Palestinian second generation (Blachnicka-Ciacek, 2018), as an important tool that enables the legitimisation of claims, particularly with regards to international claims (Bernard, 2010).

Claims-making in this context begins by Ravi’s declaration as the political representative of the LTTE. In an interview given to a South Indian news channel in 2018, Ravi fails to answer the interviewer’s question as to who appointed him as representative of the political wing. Instead he says “given the current situation I am unable to clarify this to the people, but wherever the Tamil people are living as diaspora we [LTTE] are institutionalised and active” (Red Pix24/7, 2018). Nevertheless, by releasing a statement as the political wing representative with the support of a complex network of Tamil diaspora individuals and organisations, Ravi expresses his assuredness and a sense of entitlement to the Tamil nationalistic project. These oral and written statements became his mode of representation; devising stories that made his claims authentic. This illustrates what Goffman notes, “the performer can be fully taken in by his own act: he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality, which he stages, is the real reality” (Goffman, 1956, p. 10).

Ravi’s story begins with his mother sending him to Switzerland through India on a fishing boat because she feared for his life after the assassination of his father. Ravi’s father was a member of a militant group, the Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF) alleged to have been backed by the Indian government, during the time of his death. Ravi speaks of his experience with the Swiss political system:

Freedom of expression as granted by the constitution and the system of direct democracy is supportive with regards to our activities. Nevertheless, there is racism and even though SP (/Juso)<sup>5</sup> and the Greens are seemingly supportive they merely do a balancing act. This does not do justice to the issues of migrants and only the question of integration is always discussed. Party politics will never support our work. When I was with the SP/Juso, they expected me to be neutral. My views, they told me, should not damage the party but I can’t concomitantly journey on two boats. (Interview, Zurich, 2018)

Ravi’s backstory is embodied by what Bourdieu describes as “rituals of everydayness” (Butler, 1997, p. 210) that connect to particular rituals of loss, rupture and emotion as a result of the violent conflict in his homeland and the struggle for belonging and identity in Switzerland. He mobilises his own biography when speaking, formally personalising his performance (Fall, 2020). He believes that the struggle for Tamil Eelam must be built on the legacy of the LTTEs armed struggle but re-branded anew. While he eagerly takes on this project for a new LTTE, he snubs accountability to the crimes committed by them over the years.

Politics should reflect the lives of the masses. It should be based on a feeling but not be based on emotions. I want to push Tamil politics to another level. What happened in the past is positive and we should keep this history, but it should not be restricted to the local or a Jaffna centric space. Take the black struggle, there is so much solidarity but for the Tamil issue this is lacking. Prabhakaran had a clear plan but politically no one

handled the issue well. There was a structure but there were some faults in the implementation. (Interview, Zurich, 2018)

This narrative, which leaves out accountability notwithstanding the diaspora's role in funding the war, thus remains unaddressed (Orjuela, 2017). The performance by Ravi, individually and as a group, is also linked to the informal and “unofficial” Tamil diaspora protests at the Place des Nations. Closely networked, they perform their roles as separate pieces in a larger puzzle and are material reflections of “performances of power” as manifestations of Tamil nationalism (Field notes, Geneva, 2019).

Another relevant point is how “representation is staged,” where the body is unable to perform in a vacuum and thereby requires a “stage” in the form of a space/place/time. The protestors perform in the square while Ravi performs within the building of the UN in the rooms assigned for side events as well as the main assembly hall. Furthermore, these spaces of politics become “performative articulations of power” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 434) and through iteration it characterises the hegemonic political order. These multiple transnational sites that are historically relevant are important in the process of claims-making.

Transnational coordination efforts by Movement X consist of weekly Skype sessions along with a budget of approximately US\$92,000 for three sessions per year, including the costs of flying in activists from Sri Lanka and elsewhere (Field notes, Switzerland, 2019; Interview with expert, 2018). The side events that were organised by Movement X at the UNHRC sessions I observed were carefully coordinated and scripted as modes of political engagement, including lobbying efforts in the corridors and public meeting areas, with other groups from Catalonia and Kurdistan. The performative labour that was put into the organising of side events included the prompting of questions from members of Movement X in order to jump start discussions, and the reiteration of words such as “genocide,” “nations under occupation,” “enforced disappearances,” and “militarisation.” In particular, the term genocide was an important discussion point and a discussion was asked why the international community was hesitant in its usage with regards to Sri Lanka. He responded, “it is avoided because it demands more accountability and the onus falls also on the wider international network such as weapons suppliers. If such crimes happen in Europe it would be considered as genocide” (Meeting notes, Geneva, 2019). He added that 144<sup>6</sup> countries had signed the genocide convention, including Sri Lanka, but because the international community is complicit they prefer to term it as war crimes or crimes against humanity. The panellist also noted that their lobbying efforts were recognised by organisations from other countries also working within the UN framework:

Today other organisations are asking us to join other panels. This is recognition of our role. But unfortunately, most organisations use the issue of genocide for their own funding agendas. (Meeting notes, Geneva, 2019)

Furthermore, the iterative nature of such speech acts transcends temporally, linking directly to Sri Lanka and globally through witnesses who travel to participate at the HRC sessions, to authenticate and legitimise as one of the members indicated during a session:

Bringing victims from Sri Lanka here is a way of maintaining the focus on people and ensuring the flow of information from Sri Lanka even though it is financially difficult. Around 25 activists and victims have joined us so far. (Meeting notes, Switzerland, 2019)

A mother of the disappeared in Kilinochchi, as one of the activists who travelled to Geneva noted:

I had the opportunity to tell the stories of the disappeared at the HRC. I would do anything to demand for answers to my son's disappearances even if it meant travelling all the way there. (Interview with L, Sri Lanka, 2019)

These witnesses from Sri Lanka find themselves in vulnerable situations due to an increase in scrutiny by pro-government groups while also compromising their credibility by being an important part of Movement X's performative political engagement. As an expert noted, some mothers of the disappeared were denied visas to attend the HRC sessions in Switzerland since their previous visits in 2018 were sponsored and organised by Movement X (Interview with S, Zurich, 2020). A young Tamil diaspora and former female political representative angrily noted about Movement X's international coordinator:

Victims reports are being sold at the UN. They should stop selling the stories of the Tamils who have suffered so much. If they really want to do something worthwhile they should instead push for changes to the asylum laws in Switzerland. (Interview with N, Luzern, 2018)

This is an example of the diverse views of Tamil diaspora individuals on political strategisation and also reveals diverse manifestations of Tamil nationalism.

Furthermore, such performative lobbying in the UN arena is with the support of unofficial networks that are closely connected to regional Tamil diaspora groups; for example, up to 15 hardliner Tamil organisations from near Paris reveal different motivations and strategies to create legitimacy around representations and claims-making. As a former UN expert notes, warily:

I question how this group was able to get ECOSOC accreditation in 2 years when the process normally takes from 12 to 15 years. This makes me wonder whether they are indirectly supported by the GoSL as it suits them to have Tamil groups creating negative narratives. (Interview with W, Geneva, 2020)

The UNHRC side events have been the site of surveillance and intimidation from different groups, particularly altercations between the GoSL and Tamil diaspora groups, and played a role in keeping narratives and counter-narratives alive (Meeting notes, Geneva, 2019).

The Tamil diaspora looks towards transitional justice processes as a means to achieve their goal of self-determination. A recognition that Tamils are being subject to genocide is a compelling reason (Orjuela, 2017). Here usage of words such as genocide increases legitimacy and visibility (Kelly, 2008; Walton, 2015). By placing it in the larger discourse of liberalism it is a strategic way to present nationalist claims in a language appropriate for the international community (Koinova, 2011). Claiming legitimacy is also attempted through calls for referendums during the side events as one Tamil diaspora speaker directed the discussion, stating, “we should go for a referendum of the Tamil people in order to resolve this conflict. 90% of them will vote in favour” (Meeting notes, Geneva, 2019). Other participants at the meeting supported this and voiced that pushing for a referendum must be a key point of the lobbying process. This is indicative of how certain dominant Tamil diaspora groups use a common interpretive framework that is not a true reflection of the heterogeneity of diasporic identity, political ideologies, and political strategies.

The protestors at the square used visual claims-making through the display of the Tamil Eelam Flag and the display of large posters depicting the gruesome last stages of the war as re-enactments of the past and essential for the politics of the present (Orjuela, 2017). However, the presence of the “Tamil Guards” strongly signalled the institutionalised nature of this Tamil nationalist power project. Chanting the slogan “the thirst of the Tamils is for the nation of Tamil Eelam,” the crowd waved Tamil Eelam flags in front of a board with the words “Justice for Tamils – international and independent investigation and UN referendum for Tamil Eelam” next to cut-outs of Prabhakaran, one in military attire and another in plain white clothes. This visual representation of the slain leader was an interesting symbolisation of the shift in claims-making practices from waging wars to peaceful means, as one of the protestors looked at me and said “the image of our *thalaivar*/leader keeps the hope for Tamil Eelam alive in our hearts.” The informal site of protest visually communicated to the internationals as well as the Tamil diaspora the legacy of the LTTE, their ability to organise, provide security and thereby claim to be legitimate representatives of a process towards self-determination (Field notes, Switzerland, 2019).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

What do observations of performative practices in formal and informal transnational sites such as the UN reveal? Attempts are made for a distinct scripting process that includes various transnational actors to evidence their representativeness and their legitimacy. The iterative usage of appropriate language, and the micro-practices that link the informal and formal as well as the enhanced networking between Tamil diaspora actors and international allies are some of the concrete modes of political engagement within and around the UN, as sites of geopolitical significance. Further, this paper reveals empirical insights into strategic shifts in claims-making processes of the Tamil diaspora to realise self-determination. It also challenges the narratives around the portrayal of the Tamil diaspora as a singular actor despite their heterogeneous characteristics, ideologies and political aspirations. The Tamil diaspora have become better mobilisers for justice using civil society initiatives such as the 2010 civil society led “people’s tribunal” in Dublin to determine the Sri Lankan state’s complicity with war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the follow-up tribunal in Bremen that concluded

that Tamils have been subject to genocide in 2013 (Orjuela, 2017). Though these initiatives hold no legal leverage, they continue to be symbolically relevant to diaspora politics and claims-making.

The diasporas' role in keeping the question of accountability and justice alive in the international arena needs to be acknowledged, albeit critically due to differing aspirations of Tamils still living in Sri Lanka. Creating an archival and documentation base of diaspora activism for self-determination within the UN, particularly in the form of resolutions and referendums, would be important steps towards legitimisation and democratisation. The recent development of digital technologies has affected profound changes in media consumption and nation building (Yusupova & Rutland, 2020). It has become an imagination that goes beyond what Anderson (2006) conceptualised, transforming notions of nation-state and identity. Digitalisation's impact on long-distance ethno-nationalisms has been further complicated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, blurring the boundaries of the nation due to its global dimensions. As revealed through the empirics, there is an enabling of informal spaces in relation to performative nationalist politics through the collapsing of physical spaces of transnationalism with emotional and intimate everyday spaces. Further, the UN's role as a catalyst in the journey towards self-determination continues to cast doubts as to whether it is a procedural and substantial means to an end. It is yet to prove its efficacy in impacting meaningful change in terms of many conflicts around the world and continues to remain as a space for the performance of nationalistic projects.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Name of protagonist changed. Consent received by protagonist to use interviews/data for research.
- <sup>2</sup> While both notions can be read as constituting one another, particularly performance as a discipline and performativity as a characteristic nature of performance, the study of both terms as discussed by other authors are distinct.
- <sup>3</sup> Name changed, a group actively lobbying for self-determination for Sri Lankan Tamils or Eelam Tamils as they prefer to be referred to.
- <sup>4</sup> By obtaining consultative status, NGOs are able to access not only ECOSOC but also its many subsidiary bodies, the various human rights mechanisms of the UN, ad hoc processes on small arms, as well as special events organised by the President of the General Assembly. The ECOSOC is one of the six principal organs of the UN, responsible for coordinating the economic and social fields of the organisation, specifically in regards to the 15 specialised agencies, the eight functional commissions, and the five regional commissions under its jurisdiction.
- <sup>5</sup> Juso or the Young Socialists Switzerland is a party aligned to the SP or Social Democratic Party of Switzerland.
- <sup>6</sup> As of December 2019, 152 states have signed the convention.

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