

COMMENT

Why Tamils demand independence

The consequence of sixty years of oppression by the Sinhala state

The Tamil people are struggling for their right to self-rule in an independent state, Tamil Eelam.

Our demand for independence is no mere whim; it has emerged as a direct consequence of a specific, prolonged history of racially-motivated oppression and violence by the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan state.

For over sixty years since the British gave the island independence as a single entity, the Sinhala-dominated state has implemented a series of racist laws, including a constitution (in 1972 and 1975) that places their language and religion as 'first and foremost'.

Our demands for equality have been met by state violence and state-backed mob violence. For three decades, our peaceful demonstrations, civil protests and hungerstrikes were met by police and army violence, racial riots and ever-more discriminatory laws.

It was only after three decades of peaceful agitation, that armed resistance to Sinhala domination began.

The Tamils of Sri Lanka form a nation of people. We are an ethnically distinct population with our own language, culture, traditions and history.

The Sinhalese of Sri Lanka also constitute a nation with their own language, culture, traditions and history, distinct from us. We therefore consider the Tamils and Sinhalese as distinct and equal nations. We do not consider ourselves superior or inferior to the Sinhalese.

The traditional Tamil homeland is in the Northeast of the island of Sri Lanka. The Sinhala homeland is in the south of the island.

Until colonial rulers arrived, there was no single form of united rule over the island. It was only under the British colonial rule that the different parts of the island were turned into a single administration, based in a capital in the south - Colombo.

The single state of (Ceylon, later renamed) Sri Lanka which was given independence in 1948 is therefore a colonial construction. It is as 'fabricated' as those other countries which received independence from colonialism with ruler-straight borders and artificial governments.

As we are a distinct nation, with our own homeland, we have the right to self-determination under the UN principles established to end colonial rule.

Though as a nation entitled to self-rule, we initially did not seek our independence, but sought accommodation with the Sinhalese in equality and justice.

But within eight years of independence, the Sinhala majority, using the principle of 'one-person, one vote' chose a government that made Sinhala the official language, instead of English. For example, Tamils had to learn Sinhala to get jobs, especially in the state.

Since then, the two largest parties (which are Sinhala-dominated) in the island have competed for votes by promising more and more Sinhala chauvinist policies (so called ethnic 'outbidding').

In the late sixties and seventies, university admission for Tamil youth was sharply reduced, by declaring our districts as 'privileged' and thus requiring



Tamil students to score higher marks for university entrance than students from Sinhala areas.

In 1962, the military began keeping Tamils out, the beginning of an 'ethnically pure' army: Sri Lanka's military is 99% Sinhala. The army's regiments are named after Sinhala kings, which in their mythology, defeated Tamil kings. The military's rituals are Buddhist.

Five times since independence, there have been big state-organized Sinhala mob violence against the Tamil people: 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983. Thousands of people have been massacred, many tortured and raped.

The most extensive was in July 1983, when at least three thousand people died when Tamils in the south were ethnically cleansed and driven to the north.

Since the Tamil armed struggle began in the early eighties, as a form of resistance to racial domination and subjugation, the island has been at war.

The way the Sinhala-dominated state wages its war to destroy the Tamil Tigers shows how it views the Tamils.

Against areas the government does not control, it uses indiscriminate, mass aerial and artillery bombardment, blockade of food and medicine resulting in widespread starvation and suffering.

In areas the government controls, it uses abductions, executions, torture, rape. The targets are Tamil politicians and party workers, journalists, civil society activists, aid workers, etc.

The Tamils have been told by the international community that instead of seeking independence by exercising our right to self-determination, we should seek a solution within Sinhala-dominated Sri Lanka.

But the Tamils have had a long history of being oppressed; sixty painful years. Our efforts to be accommodative, to share power with the Sinhalese have been rejected and we have suffered ever more repression and violence.

The demand for an independent state emerged in 1976 when the Tamil parties united into the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). In 1977, the TULF won all the seats they contested in the Northeast by a landslide, receiving a resounding mandate for an independent state.

We have never abandoned our desire to be independent.

In 2001, the four major Tamil parties (which included the TULF and those militant groups which gave up arms) again united into the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). In 2001 and 2004, the TNA contested elections on a platform supporting Tamil independence and won with landslide again.

Since the mid-nineties, Tamils have sought refuge from the oppression and the brutal war of the Sinhala-dominated state and fled to Europe, Canada and Australia. In all these places, Tamil Diaspora has continued to demand independence.

In short, the demand for independent Tamil Eelam has broad, enduring support.

With every passing decade, despite the ferocious violence and repression unleashed by the Sinhala state with international support, our determination to be free, to rule ourselves as equals with other peoples of the world, has grown stronger.

In the name of equality and justice, we ask for your support.