

The case for self determination for Tamils in Sri Lanka

Everyone I meet in the UK has heard about the Tamil Tigers, but almost no-one understands what the civil war is about. This brief article presents a justification for the Tamil struggle for justice in a historical context that people can understand.

Political background

The 20th century had seen the emergence of new nation-states. Following on from the two world wars and the break up of various Empires, independent nations were formed with various laws and conventions governing the behaviour between these states. Mostly, these nations adopted democratic conventions as their form of governance. As many of these countries were carved out of post imperial expediency or were the result of wars, the ensuing population consisted of different ethnic groups.

The democratic process however always returned a ruling party that significantly represented the majority ethnic population. In some cases this was not an issue as the country was constituted along federal lines. In countries like India and Nigeria this resulted in many of the minorities being able to organise their own state's internal affairs such as education and have a degree of autonomy from central government.

In countries that did not have the political will or foresight to adopt a federal or devolved form of government, the victims in this lopsided political process with a permanent ethnic majority were minorities that were often spread between adjacent countries due to their colonial history. For these minorities, the nation state, democracy and racially based politics meant that their rights were inevitably eroded away to an extent where self-determination became the only course for fair play and justice open to the minority population.

The Tamil experience in Sri Lanka

With independence for Ceylon in 1948, came democracy and a majority Sinhala government. One of the first anti-Tamil legislation enacted was to deprive citizenship to nearly a million Tamils of Indian origin (brought over by the British to work the tea plantations). Despite being born in Ceylon and enriching the nation by supporting its major export industry, later generations of these Tamils were made stateless overnight in contravention of any international norms of the time.

Politicians vying for power played the race card again and again to win elections. Basically this involved enacting laws to favour the majority ethnic population, the Sinhalese and against the minorities. From a two language policy with parity of status, SWRD Bandaranayake, the Prime Minister enacted laws to make Sinhala the official language of the state.

Peaceful Tamil political protests against these and other discriminatory laws were responded to by anti-Tamil riots. The details of these riots are well documented elsewhere, so I shall not go into great detail here. But the common feature of these and subsequent riots in 1958, 1977 and 1983 were:

- They were not riots in that they were not spontaneous. In the main they were organised by politicians from the ruling party.
- Their sole intention was to terrify and subjugate the Tamil people
- The police and army in the main did little to quell the riots and in some cases assisted the rioters.
- Not one person has been brought to justice for the murder, rape, arson or looting that was a feature of all these riots.

The Tamil political response to these and a number of other anti-Tamil legislation was to lobby for devolution of power either through a federal structure or powerful provincial councils. History shows that despite various pacts and promises, the political arithmetic meant that all laws passed favoured the majority population to allow parties to win elections.

For those wanting to read more about the background to this, please see here <http://www.tamilcanadian.com/page.php?cat=52&id=11>

As legitimate political protest came to nothing and life in Sri Lanka became intolerable, there were three choices available to the Tamil people:

- To emigrate legally or as an asylum seeker
- Bend to the will of the majority, and subjugate their Tamil identity
- Face the inevitable conclusion that self government was the only answer to the tyranny that they were facing.

The American experience

The most powerful justification for the struggle for Tamil Ealam comes from the American Declaration of Independence. The whole document can be seen here

<http://www.ushistory.org/Declaration/document/index.htm>

I quote various sections below.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

The above is a clear endorsement from the founding fathers of the USA to replace a tyrannical government.

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

This statement, in the light of the history of the American War of Independence, is a further justification for getting rid of a Despotic government.

Some of the just causes presented by the founding fathers of the USA are presented below: Those with knowledge of events in Sri Lanka will recognise the uncanny relevance of these (written on the 4th of July 1776) to current events.

- He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

(Emergency powers)

- For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:
(High Security Zones displacing fishermen and farmers)

- For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

(Sham trial into the military execution of 15 aid-workers from the French Charity ACF)

- He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

(DPU attacks on civilians. White van abduction and murder of journalists)

- He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

(Ban on fishing. Blockading of the A9 highway. Indiscriminate bombings, abductions and shootings)

- He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

(Arms and training from Pakistan and China)

- In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.

(Repeated appeals to International bodies to intervene. Adherence to ceasefire)

Summary

This is a short article to show the background to the current civil war in Sri Lanka and the case for self government when faced with tyranny. If it is good enough for the American people, surely it is good enough for the Tamils.

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