

## Testing United States Ambassador Robert Blake on Tamil Statehood

United States Ambassador Robert Blake urged LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran to renounce the Tamil quest for statehood in an interview published in the Sunday Observer Newspaper on May 25. With the owlish certainty which earmarks the glitterati, the Ambassador proclaimed that the Tamil people "are not seeking an independent Tamil Eelam which Prabhakaran is seeking." Indeed, he had discerned from his opulent ambassadorial milieu that a staggering "95%" supported a solution within a united Sri Lanka, leaving Prabhakaran with a depleted 5% following.

The Rajapaksa brothers rejoiced. The Ambassador confirmed their fairy tale that Tamils from the north and east had flocked by the hundreds of thousands to Colombo not to escape from aerial bombardments, an embargo on humanitarian aid, and routine assassinations and kidnappings; but to enjoy the blessings of racial and religious harmony fostered by the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Among other things, the Act makes criminal any peaceful Tamil protest against their persecution that upsets a Sinhalese. General Fonseka sulked like Achilles in his tent. "If Prabhakaran enjoys such microscopic popular support," he ruminated with the dullness of a jackal, "then I will be soon asked why the Sri Lankan armed forces are not running victory laps around the Jaffna Peninsula."

It seems reasonable to conjecture that Ambassador Blake 95% estimate of Tamil statehood opposition may have ignored grisly or odious landmarks in the history of Sri Lanka:

1. The Citizenship Act which denied civic and political rights to one million Tamils of Indian descent who toiled on the tea plantations; and, subjected the remaining Tamils to a Sinhalese majority tyranny.
2. The 1956 Official Language Act providing that "Sinhala Only" shall be the official language.
3. The revocation of constitutional safeguards for the Tamil minority in the new 1972 Republican Constitution imposed without popular ratification.
4. The statement of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front, after winning the by-election in 1974 where he sought a mandate for Tamil Eelam: "The National Convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front meeting at Pannakam...on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of May 1976, hereby declares that the Tamils of Ceylon, by virtue of their great language, their religions, their separate culture and heritage, their history of independent existence as a separate state over a distinct territory for several centuries till they were conquered by the armed might of the European invaders, and above all by their will to exist as a separate entity ruling themselves in their own territory, are a nation distinct and apart from the Sinhalese and this Convention announced to the world that the Republican Constitution of 1972 has made the Tamils a slave nation ruled by the new colonial masters, the Sinhalese, who are using the power they have wrongly usurped to deprive the Tamil nation of its territory, language, citizenship, economic life, opportunities of employment and education, thereby destroying all attributes of nationhood of the Tamil people, and therefore...This convention resolves that the

restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam based on the right of self determination inherent in every nation has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in this country."

5. The statement of President J.R. Jayawardene to the Daily Telegraph on July 11, 1983 while state organized race riots were slaughtering Tamils by the thousands and displacing more than 100,000: "I am not worried about the opinion of the Tamil people...now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion...the more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here...Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhalese people will be happy."

Ambassador Blake, however, should be praised for tacitly acknowledging that the political fate of the Tamil people should pivot on what the majority cherish. The Tamil majority should not be dictated to by Prabhakarkan or anyone else—including the Ambassador who has never attracted a single Tamil vote. The time-honored method for determining whether a group of people desire independent statehood under international law is by conducting a fair and free referendum. East Timor, Eritrea, and Montenegro are recent examples. (Kosovo declared its independence by parliamentary vote). In Canada, Quebec has twice voted on independence, and rejected the option twice. And the United States permits Puerto Rico an independence vote, which has never attracted more than a tiny 4%.

Ambassador Blake should pursue the logic of his own exhortation to Prabhakaran. He should expose his 95% figure to the test of a Tamil statehood referendum conducted under United Nations auspices. If statehood prevails, the Ambassador should be the first to concede Prabhakaran's superiority in discerning the political aspirations of the Tamil people.

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