

## OPINION

# The UK Column



## Everything to work for

As Britain gears up for the general elections next year, British Tamils' efforts to keep Sri Lanka on the political agenda gain a new urgency. The immediate priority is of course saving almost 300,000 Tamils interned by Sri Lanka in squalid barbed wire fenced camps. The camps remain an urgent issue but Tamil activists must also work towards a longer term strategy of challenging the mistaken assumptions that have driven Britain's Sri Lanka policy.

Britain, along with most western states, has thus far supported Sri Lanka's military solution to the Tamil problem because of a misunderstanding of political dynamics on the island. Since the late 1970's when the government of President J. R. Jeyawardene took a decisive turn to the west, Sri Lanka has been regarded as a flawed but redeemable liberal democracy.

In this context many western policy makers simply blamed the LTTE and Tamil nationalism more generally as the 'cause' of the ethnic conflict. However, western policy frameworks can also see Sri Lanka had structurally oppressed the Tamils from independence and excluded them from meaningful democratic self government.

But the political exclusion of the Tamils were seen merely another symptom of the many 'flaws' in Sri Lanka's democratic system. The system is seen as notoriously corrupt; electoral violence is common, ministers and parliamentarians regularly steal from the public purse to build personalised patronage and buy support amongst the electorate, there are close and growing links between politicians and the underworld and all governments have stifled opponents.

So for most western policy makers, Sri Lanka's ethnic problems were merely ones of 'poor governance' and 'bad' economic policy. It was not Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism that was excluding and oppressing the Tamils, they argued, it was simply corrupt structures of governance and an overly politicised state. There was general confidence that once the governance issues were fixed the Tamil problem would simply dissolve.

Because of this firm belief in Sri Lanka's inherent capacity to be 'reformed', western

states have backed Sri Lanka's military campaigns despite its appalling record of brutality against the Tamils. Western policy makers firmly expected that once the LTTE was crushed Sri Lanka's Sinhalese leaders would be true to their liberal and pluralist inclinations and move towards a programme of political and economic reform that would inevitably also include a meaningful solution to the Tamil problem.

For the first time since the late 1970's this analysis of Sri Lanka's conflict is under severe strain.

The spite and venom with which Sri Lanka slaughtered tens of thousands of Tamil civilians during its military offensives shocked most international observers. Meanwhile Sri Lanka has treated international humanitarian agencies and western demands for restraint with scorn and derision.

The Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapakse, has also made it clear that there will be no political solution to the Tamil question; Sri Lanka will remain a resolutely Sinhala Buddhist land and Tamils will be coerced into accepting their place within the Sinhala-first hierarchy.

The possibilities of transforming Sri Lanka into a vibrant multinational and plural state are fast diminishing with the growing ethnic animosity.

The Sri Lankan political establishment has also told western states in no uncertain terms that Colombo will be re-orientating its geo political relationships. Sri Lanka will now only be friends with states that are not in the least bit concerned by issues such as the rule of law, good governance or democratic accountability.

Under these conditions Sri Lanka's occasional parroting of the liberal democratic ethos sounds ever more like taunting mockery than the previous decades of meaningless but more or less playful charade.

Tamil activists must take this opportunity to engage and challenge the assumptions that have driven Britain's Sri Lanka policy. We must make clear why Sri Lanka's crisis is not just a problem of bad governance or poor economic policy. President Mahinda Rajapakse is in fact executing policies that are in keeping with the

Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism that is deeply embedded within the Sinhala polity and state institutions.

Sri Lanka expects that by subjecting the Tamils to conditions of abject humiliation it will cleanse them of their national identity. Like Stalinist Russia, it is attempting political 're-education' through mental trauma and physical torture.

The Sri Lankan government's categorical refusal to engage the Tamil question is also perfectly in keeping with this. Sinhala leaders have only ever paid lip service to liberal or pluralist ideals as a means of winning western support for the war against the LTTE. Now that the LTTE has apparently been crushed all talk of a political solution has been dropped - by all major Sinhala parties.

In this climate British Tamil lobbyists must work to convince British policy makers that Sri Lanka multifaceted crises cannot be addressed through international humanitarian and human rights frameworks alone. Rather Britain must work to tackle the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism that is driving the crisis head on. And something stronger than words is needed.

Whilst challenging the assumption that Sri Lanka's present crisis is simply 'poor governance', Tamil activists must also work to change misunderstanding of Tamil demands. The demand for Tamil Eelam and the LTTE were not the causes of the ethnic conflict but the inevitable consequences of Sri Lanka's systematic oppression over decades of Tamils' political, cultural and economic rights.

Tamil demands did not provoke the ethnic conflict. Rather Tamils made these demands when Sinhala Buddhist policies of ethnic cleansing and economic strangulation threatened the existence of the distinct Tamil identity.

Our demand that Tamils are allowed to live in peace and security in their areas of historical habitation and be allowed to pursue their economic and social development is perfectly in keeping with Western liberal political ideals. Tamils demand an independent state not because we oppose liberal forms of governance but because Sri Lanka is entirely unwilling to include the Tamils on an equitable basis within a liberal framework.



Tamil lobbyists must also work to demand that Britain takes a firm stand on the recognition of the Tamil national identity and homeland. This means recognising we have the right to choose our future. In the absence of such international recognition, Tamil rights will continue to be vulnerable to the Sinhala majority's ethnic domination of the state.

The Sinhala state will continue policies of ethnic cleansing, economic strangulation, military repression and political exclusion. The British state can no longer support these policies as the path towards an inclusive, liberal democratic state.

We must demand that international development aid, trade concessions, political support and other support must be made conditional on real and substantive progress on the Tamil question. Unless the Sinhala polity is made to accept that its oppression of the Tamils is incompatible with international standards, Sri Lanka will continue to spiral towards unending war.

British Tamils are in a unique position to influence

international perspectives on Sri Lanka. The Tamil Diaspora is growing in confidence and maturity and the second generation in particular is gaining a familiarity with the language and objectives of Western policy making.

Sustained and continued engagement by the British Tamil community can, along with the ground situation in Sri Lanka, work to question British assumptions. As British citizens we also must lobby our government on issues that are in firmly in keeping with British interests and priorities whilst being important to us.

Britain is one of the five members of the Security Council and a leading state in the European Union. As such the UK continues to have a rightfully important role to play in the international politics of Sri Lanka's conflict.

If British Tamils make their case firmly, clearly and consistently, the UK and the rest of the international community will soon start to see Sri Lanka's problem for what it is: racist state oppression. The time could not be more critical - or more opportune.