

## OPINION

# The UK Column



## Irrelevance of Sri Lankan elections

Sri Lanka's political circles are once again overcome by the speculative frenzy that accompanies all elections. Presidential and parliamentary elections are widely expected early next year and a growing chorus of voices is insisting that the elections can be used to change Sri Lanka's political realities for the better. Many of these voices are also calling upon the Tamil Diaspora to take a position.

The mounting electoral fever must not however shift the Diaspora's focus from its international campaign to secure Tamil rights or allow the Diaspora's energy and resources to become just another factor in the tactical manoeuvres of Sri Lanka's electoral politics. As Sri Lanka's history shows there is no simple electoral solution to the Tamil problem.

Indeed Sri Lanka's sixty year history of oppression has been punctuated by regular elections in which the Sinhala polity has without fail endorsed and encouraged the escalating anti Tamil racism of the main Sinhala parties. Sri Lanka's oppression cannot be reversed through the same electoral mechanism that has for the past sixty years been the channel and vehicle of Sinhala triumphalism.

Sri Lanka's structural oppression of the Tamils will not end until the Sinhala polity as a whole abandons the racism that has for the past sixty years sought to transform the island into a Sinhala first ethnocracy. Yet another set of elections is not going to rid the Sinhala polity of the fixations that have now been entrenched through repeated electoral cycles.

Only sustained international pressure will force the Sinhala polity to accept that oppressing Tamils is unacceptable and incompatible with the long term peace and stability of the island.

The Tamil Diaspora is now in a perfect position to build international support for this cause. Well settled in the west and beyond the reach of Sri Lanka's long arm of oppression, the Tamil Diaspora's energies should be focussed on keeping Sri Lanka on the international agenda, rather than concentrating on matters that cannot be changed by the Tamils.

Although support should be extended to those members of the TNA who have always taken a principled position on the Tamil question, the Diaspora should not become just another constituency in the patronage politics of Sri Lankan democracy. Not only is Sri Lanka's political culture of nepotism and shifting, opportunistic alliances incapable of resolving the island's fundamental contradictions, it is also now increasingly alien to the Tamil Diaspora's political experiences.

Tamil activists, including the second generation of Diaspora activists who led the recent phase of mobilisation, have been socialised in an entirely different political

culture. The Tamil struggle has always been distinct from other Sri Lankan and South Asian movements in its insistence on meritocracy and the disavowal of caste, regional, gender and most importantly dynastic hierarchies. This has been compounded by decades of activism in the west which has built a broad based Tamil national identity rooted in the universal demands of rights, progress and development.

In contrast, Sri Lankan democracy remains mired in corruption and nepotism and is sustained by caste and village based patronage networks. If the Diaspora diverted its considerable resources and energy towards Sri Lanka's local politics it would simply end up sustaining corrupt patronage networks rather than building a secure future for the Tamil people.

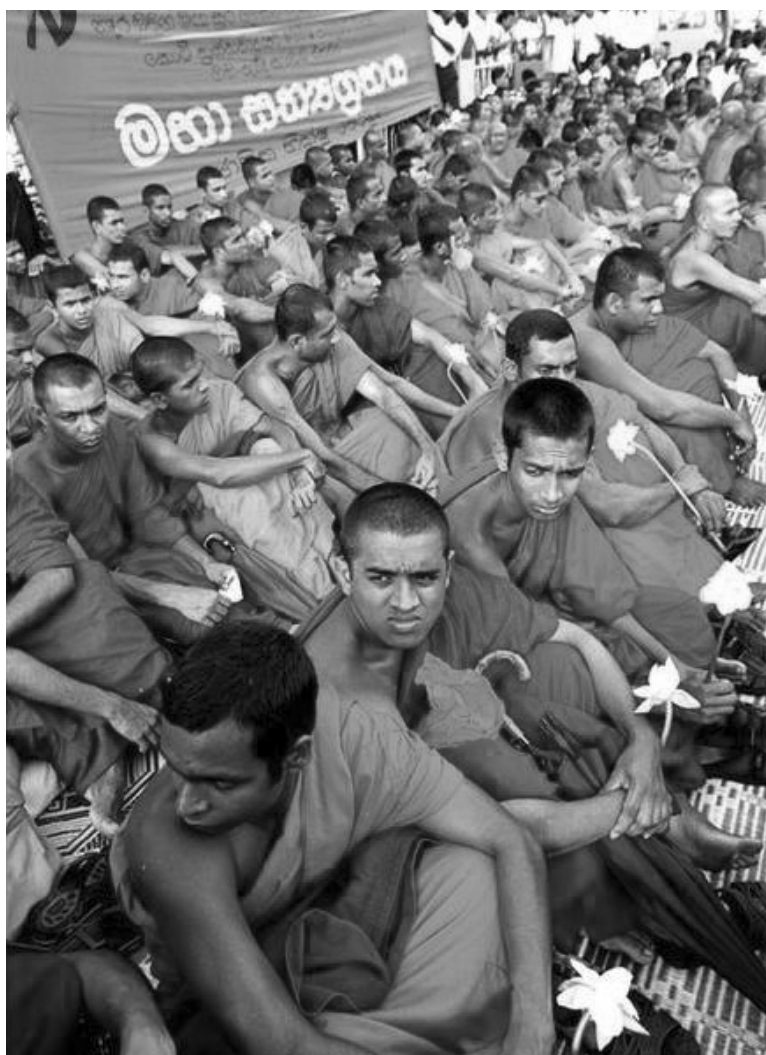
It is important to remember that none of the major Sinhala parties have made credible commitments on Tamil rights. None of the major Sinhala parties have unreservedly condemned the slaughter and incarceration of Tamils in the Vanni. Nor have they raised their voices against the military occupation of Jaffna or indeed sought to halt the ethnic cleansing in the East.

Given the Sinhala parties expressed positions, it is clear that without sustained international pressure whatever the outcome of the Sri Lankan elections the manifesto of Sinhala Buddhist racism will continue to dominate the island's politics. Under these conditions, Tamil rights can only be secured by changing international policies towards Sri Lanka.

Despite its bluster to the contrary, Sri Lanka is acutely vulnerable to international pressure and the Diaspora can best serve the Tamil cause by exploiting these vulnerabilities. Sri Lanka's access to international financial and political support must be made dependent on progress on the Tamil question.

The British Tamil Diaspora, along with the Tamil Diaspora in other western countries must demand full humanitarian and media access to all the Tamil speaking areas along with a credible and internationally sanctioned mechanism of justice. Without justice and a return to normalcy in the Tamil speaking areas, there can be no reconciliation and therefore no meaningful political solution to the Tamil question.

Sri Lanka's political elite will not abandon its long entrenched racism until it finds that international pressure makes the preservation of the Sinhala Buddhist ethnocracy economically and politically unviable. Whilst the Tamil Diaspora is in no position to shift the Sinhala Buddhist mandate, it has every opportunity of ensuring that Sri Lanka's racism no longer pays in the international arena. The Tamil Diaspora should leave Sri Lankan elections to the patrons and the clients and focus on securing international support for Tamil rights.



Norway is working with Sri Lankan monks, who have long been at the forefront of anti-Tamil sentiments on the island

crimes by the parties in the last phase of the war, Norway is totally absent in the international news-picture when it comes to the opinion on the situation in Sri Lanka.

Norway contents itself by assisting the financing of the internment camps through UN-organisations and the private Norwegian organisations that have been provided access to operate there.

The situation of the internally displaced is being described on the same lines as that of a consequence of a natural catastrophe in the government documents of Norway.

For example, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, in its 2010 budget forecast (Prop. 1 S) page 69, says, "Norway would maintain a meaningful humanitarian and political engagement to improve the situation of the internally displaced."

THE TRUTH IS THAT Norway, certainly together with the UN and other individual states, through its "humanitarian" work, is heavily financing and managing the camps where a considerable number of the Tamil minority people are being held in captivity and dying.

The Sri Lankan government has budgeted the maintenance of the camps for the next year with 225 million dollars from the international donors.

Probably, the stream of money the camps are generating is a major reason for the displaced still being kept under captivity.

Another reason is presumably that the Sri Lankan government, through the establishment of military complexes and Buddhist temples, is preparing a massive, Sinhalese military and religious

dominance in the Tamil areas that have been emptied of inhabitants.

It will not be surprising if the Norwegian aid in future is also incorporated into infrastructure-efforts related to this project.

Officials in the Foreign Ministry, in informal conversation with the author, have revealed that the Norwegian authorities are up to appeasing the Sri Lankan government, now that the Tamil Tigers are out of the picture.

The only way of doing this is to abet the discrimination of the minorities - together with Sri Lanka's other friends Iran, Burma and China.

A minor but an exposing example how this is taking place, in practice, is Norway's cultural cooperation through Concerts Norway (Rikskosertene) with the Buddhist organisation Sewalanka.

One of the projects in the cooperation is conduct of a music festival in the town of Galle on 27 November this year.

Those who are familiar with Sri Lanka would be aware that the date November 27 is not an arbitrary choice, it is the date when the Tamil Tigers mark their fallen heroes and the day has been observed as the national day of Tamils, throughout the war.

The music festival, this year, is part of the Sri Lankan government's celebration of its victory over these heroes, and is a part of the continued humiliation of the Tamil minority - paid by Norwegian tax money.

*This is an English translation of a feature article by Øivind Fuglerrud, Professor of Anthropology, University of Oslo, in Dagbladet, a Norwegian newspaper.*