

## EDITORIAL AND OPINION

## TAMIL GUARDIAN

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## Open Voice

## The Diaspora seeks to speak instead of being spoken for

The Tamil Diaspora in several Western states is presently conducting or planning referenda on the question of Tamil Eelam. Whilst the precise wording varies, in essence, Tamils are voting on the simple question: do we want an independent sovereign state of Tamil Eelam or not? Why, three decades after the Tamils voted overwhelmingly for the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) on the basis of its single issue manifesto - 'an independent Tamil Eelam' - are these referenda being held?

The answer is simple: ever since 1977, this collective demand and popular mandate has been studiously ignored and instead all kinds of voices - including the Sinhala state, marginal Tamil actors and important members of the international community - have simply asserted that 'the majority' of Tamils reject independence. Crucially, they have done so whilst simultaneously lending tacit or overt support to the systematic and forcible denial of any space for the Tamil people to freely express their views on this core issue.

In short, whilst being prevented from speaking openly, the Tamils have been spoken for. Those Tamil actors - such as the Liberation Tigers - who articulated the popular demand independence - and even those who talked about self-determination - were both denounced (as 'terrorists', 'nationalists', 'extremists', even fascists') and punitively targeted. The international community banned the LTTE and, having armed the murderous Sinhala state, encouraged it to attack - ostensibly so that the Tigers 'may be brought to the table' (it is worth noting, for those who point to the LTTE's violence, that this is no different to that of the Kosovo Liberation Army, the Jewish militants who created Israel or the host of anti-colonial liberation movements of the 20th century).

It is worth noting how, even during the Norwegian peace process, the abduction and murder by the Sinhala state of hundreds of journalists, writers, civil society and political activists advocating the cause of Tamil self-determination, drew little criticism from the international community - despite the investigative presence of EU ceasefire monitors.

Meanwhile, it is notable how the circumstances and results of the 1977 election are rarely taken up, let alone taken seriously, in the now voluminous, if largely not rigorous, academic, policy and media analysis of Sri Lanka's ethnic question, politics and conflict. This is despite the central Tamil demand for three

decades being that of their right to self-determination. Instead, the strident assertion by most international actors has been that 'most Tamils' don't want independence. Whether this was genuinely felt by them, or cynically deployed to justify self-serving projects is irrelevant. For all the lecturing and moralizing about 'democracy' and 'pluralism', all those who called for Tamil Eelam were marginalized, pilloried and punished.

The space thus naturally opened for all manner of marginal Tamil actors to adopt the label of 'moderate' and ingratiate themselves into the structurally impossible, but what was for them wholly self-serving, international project of 'transforming Sri Lanka' into a liberal democracy. Even when the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) - amongst whose ranks are some of these 'moderates' - emerged on a platform of endorsing self-determination as well as the LTTE, and received a thumping endorsement in the 2001 and 2004 elections (which, in comparison to most Sri Lankan polls had a greater degree of being 'free and fair'), it was consistently dismissed as an 'LTTE-proxy'.

Meanwhile, the Liberation Tigers' assertion they were the sole, authentic representatives of the Tamil people - enshrined in the TNA's 2004 manifesto - was vehemently rejected, not only by the Sinhala ethnocracy, but also the international community and some Tamil actors. None of these critics engaged with the rationale behind the LTTE's assertion: that the majority of Tamils want Tamil Eelam and the LTTE was the only actor articulating this stance. Instead, on the assertion that the Tamils don't want Tamil Eelam, a catastrophic war was unleashed again on our people. In the name of our supposed political preferences, our homeland was laid waste to, our people slaughtered and the entire population of Vanni incarcerated.

Since 1977, the Tamil people's views have only been sought through the tightly circumscribed, corrupt and murderously dangerous space of the Sri Lankan political system. During the last round of Norwegian-facilitated direct talks between the LTTE and the Sinhala state, the government challenged the movement's claim it spoke for the Tamils. In response, the LTTE's Political Head, S. P. Tamilselvan, challenged Colombo to allow a United Nations-run referendum of the Tamil people. He was met with silence. The referenda on Tamil Eelam being organized by the Diaspora are an effort by Tamils to speak over those speaking for us.

2013 CHOGM  
- will it still be  
1984 in  
Sri Lanka?

Craig Scott

THE government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has trouble with the truth. Alongside a track record of distortions and outright lies, its mastery of doublespeak of the sort Orwell so brilliantly narrated in his novel 1984 is both well-known and a thing to behold.

Consider the latest piece of propagandistic spin emerging from the Sri Lankan government after the just-ended Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Trinidad and Tobago.

Ever since 2007, the GoSL had been lobbying Commonwealth countries for Sri Lanka to be designated as the host of the next CHOGM in 2011.

Heading to Trinidad, Sri Lanka's diplomats had the wind at their backs after, earlier this year, marshaling the votes in the UN Human Rights Council to transform a condemnatory resolution into a resolution that in effect praised GoSL.

In the result, Sri Lanka emerged as a future host, but for 2013 not 2011.

To judge by GoSL's version of events, the UK and Prime Minister Gordon Brown was Sri Lanka's biggest ally.

In a November 30 media release entitled "Britain proposes Sri Lanka to host CHOGM 2013," the Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports as follows: "Since Australia and Mauritius had also offered to be host, [UK] Prime Minister (Gordon) Brown had pointed out that all three countries are equally qualified and it was decided by the Commonwealth Heads of Government that they host the 2011 and 2015 CHOGMs respectively."

"The endorsement of Sri Lanka by the entire membership of the Commonwealth singularly demonstrates the recognition of Sri Lanka's adherence to the Commonwealth values and principles with the country being one of the most vibrant democracies," the report said.

Has the world's triumph-over-terror poster boy pulled off another victory akin to that at the UN Human Rights Council, in the process compromising the integrity of the British Prime Minister?

Only, it turns out, if you live in 1984 and not 2009.

For the truth is that Gordon Brown was far from Sri Lanka's

patron saint in Trinidad.

On the eve of the conference, the UK made clear that it opposed the 2011 CHOGM taking place in Sri Lanka.

On November 27, The Times of London reported two senior UK diplomatic sources as saying, in tandem: "(T)he UK will not support a Sri Lankan bid. Their conduct of their military campaign ...had a massive impact on the civilian population (and) was rightly condemned around the world...At the time, the Prime Minister urged President Rajapaksa to ensure further suffering was minimised and that the UN had full access to those affected and displaced by the conflict. ... (A) clear consequence of what happened earlier this year is that we are not in a position to support a bid by Sri Lanka to host CHOGM. We want the next host to reflect the full range of Commonwealth values - and particularly respect for human rights. As it stands, 150,000 internally displaced persons remain in closed camps. We are urging the Sri Lankan government to allow their freedom of movement. The Prime Minister has real concerns about Sri Lanka's bid. We simply cannot be in a position where Sri Lanka ... is seen to be rewarded for its actions."

According to the Guardian, Mr. Brown persuaded Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to join Britain in taking a stand.

The Brown-Harper strategy was clearly stick (no to 2011) followed by carrot (2013). At the end of the CHOGM on November 29, Prime Minister Harper held a news conference at which he focused on the future.

He presented the awarding of the 2013 CHOGM to Sri Lanka as an incentive for Sri Lanka to do right: "[2013] should give Sri Lanka plenty of time to get on a path towards genuine political reconciliation and broad-based multi-ethnic participation in their democracy. I think we all understand Sri Lanka has had enormous challenges with security and the civil war..., but at the same time there are deeper issues of political division, of political estrangement, of estrangement from the political system, of ethnic division that the government of Sri Lanka is going to have to address, if it wants to move forward in a positive direction."