

OPINION

The UK Column



Voting for freedom: the Vaddukoddai referendum and the Tamil struggle

British Tamils' resounding endorsement of the Vaddukoddai Resolution in January's referendum was a landmark event. The results of the referendum have established the principle of Tamil independence as central to Tamil politics and over the medium to long term will inevitably change the terms of international engagement in Sri Lanka.

The referendum in Britain is the latest in a wave of global Diaspora polls that tested Tamil support for the principles enshrined in the Vaddukoddai Resolution; the creation of an independent Tamil state in the north-eastern Tamil homelands based on the principle of self determination.

In polls held across Europe and Canada, British Tamils along with the rest of the Eelam Tamil Diaspora have sent a clear and unmistakable message of ongoing commitment to the fundamental principles of the Tamil struggle.

Following the referenda it is no longer possible to talk of divisions amongst the Tamils, of moderates and extremists. It is now clear that the vast majority of Tamils support independence; the demand for Eelam is unmistakably the mainstream and not the margins of Tamil politics.

British Tamils must maintain the momentum gained by the referendum and use the results to make the case for Eelam in all the varied spheres of their activism and lobbying. The monumental effort that went into the polls has opened up the space for talking about Eelam and it must not be allowed to pass.

The Eelam struggle demands engagement with a myriad of political, media and civil society activists. Diaspora activists can now explain how so many apparently reasonable Tamils demand Eelam and why the idea of Eelam has remained central to the Tamil struggle for over thirty years.

There will of course be those who dismiss the polls with the argument that the Diaspora can in no way represent the views of Tamils on the ground. The Diaspora, some will argue, has the luxury of armchair nationalism whilst those on the ground who face the harsh realities of politics would be more willing to compromise the dream of Eelam in the interests of peace and stability in the here and now.

Whilst this argument presumptively dismisses the deep and ongoing familial connections between the Diaspora and Tamils in the homeland, it also arrogantly claims to know what Tamils in Sri Lanka think and feel without bothering to ask them.

Under Sri Lanka's oppressive regime, Tamils in the homeland cannot express their wishes through the free, fair, transparent and independently observed polls that were conducted by the Diaspora.

While the sixth amendment to the constitution legally prohibits the Tamil demand for independence, the Sri Lankan state and its armed forces also regularly unleash abduction, assassination and retaliatory violence against Tamil politicians, activists and journalists in an effort to stifle and repress the demand for independence.

When Tamils in Eelam have had the

opportunity to express their views, they have unmistakably chosen Eelam. In the 2001 and 2004 parliamentary elections Eelam Tamils backed the Tamil National Alliance that stood on a platform of endorsing the LTTE's political leadership.

Those who confidently assert that Tamils on the island do not want Eelam must be asked whether they could be willing to back a UN monitored referendum to test the issue. From the results of the 1977 general elections when the Vaddukoddai Resolution was first mandated, to the present Diaspora polls, all show that the Eelamists have nothing to fear and everything to gain from democracy.

The demand for Eelam is a response to unbearable oppression; it is a means of protecting the Tamil identity and homeland from Sri Lanka's genocidal ambitions. The suffering and violence that Tamils have endured over the past eighteen months has only reinforced the logic of the Eelam demand.

The British referendum along with the rest of the Diaspora polls is the most authentic democratic expression of what the Tamils want; those who seek to dismiss the results must forsake the framework of democratic legitimacy.

Another set of arguments will accept the Democratic authenticity of the polls but argue that the demand for Eelam is now out of touch with international realities. Many who fancy themselves expert analysts of international affairs argue that there is simply no appetite for creating new states and the international system will no longer tolerate secessionist demands.

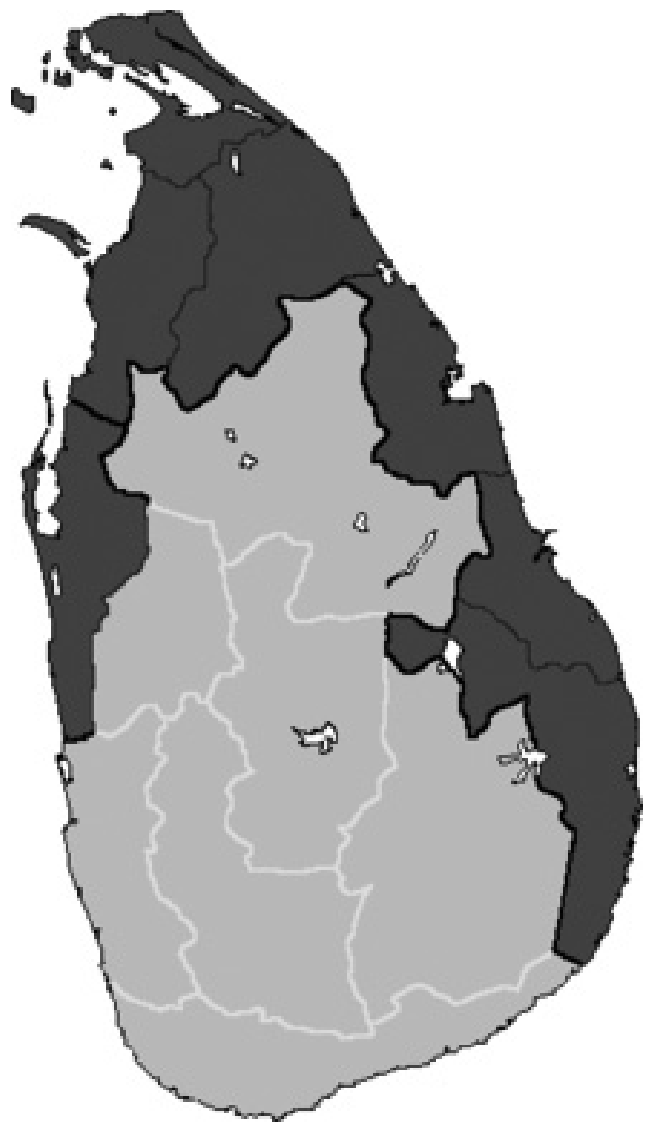
However, even a cursory reading of international history shows that the demand for Eelam is neither out of touch nor out of time. The formation of states and the maintenance of international boundaries is an act of the international system not an act of nature.

It is in the interests of peace and stability and not in the interests of state sovereignty that the international system of states maintains, creates and partitions states. Over a mere sixty years there have been profound changes in international boundaries across the globe. In 1942 only 26 states signed the Atlantic Charter that set in motion the formation of the United Nations but the world's apex body of states at present has 196 members.

International efforts to secure peace and stability in Sri Lanka can no longer dismiss Tamil demands for independence as 'marginal' or 'extremist'. As the Sri Lankan state's implacable chauvinism becomes ever more apparent, and Sri Lanka's slide towards unending ethnic polarization appears unstoppable, the case for Eelam is clearer than ever.

Sri Lanka's determination to violently erase the Tamil identity will inevitably fuel further conflict and only be checked by an internationally backed political settlement that explicitly recognises the Tamil national identity and homeland.

The Diaspora polls demonstrate that the Tamil demand for independence remains undiminished and therefore indispensable to any credible effort to secure peace and stability on the island.



Tamil Eelam lives

Jan Jananayagam

This is the text of the speech delivered at the announcement of the referendum results on January 31 at the Park Lane hotel in central London.

WE today affirm a principle that is common to all humankind: the right of a people to choose.

Tamil Eelam exists because we do.

The referendum for Tamil Eelam continues across the globe: Britain with its historical ties is but one more link in that chain.

Tamil Eelam exists because a scattered and oppressed people has chosen. As in 1977 but this time from across all the corners of the earth.

We assert a principle that has been formulated time and again in history, not least by the founding fathers of America and our own Thanthai Chelva. To quote Tom Paine: "The fact therefore must be that the individuals themselves, each in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a compact with each other to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist ..."

We have today entered into a

compact. We, the living, have mandated Tamil Eelam.

And in doing so we honour those who have died in the vanni and elsewhere, those who have died for our deepest dream, the dream of Tamil Eelam.

We say to them: you remain in our hearts. Though the world may deny you, we do not, for today, we say again that your dream is our dream.

They tried to destroy us: they bombed us, they starved us, they killed our children, destroyed our hospitals and killed the wounded and maimed.

But they have failed
And Tamil Eelam lives.

We cannot dedicate. We cannot consecrate.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who died for Eelam have thus far advanced. As Lincoln said, so say we: that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.