

The Rajapaksas – rotten to the core

By [Bruce Haigh](#)

Aug 8, 2022

Australian foreign policy and morality sunk to a very low point over its dealings with the Rajapaksa regime and demonisation of Tamil asylum seekers.

Under the British the Tamils in Sri Lanka prospered. From the time of independence in 1948 their fortunes declined at the hands of the majority and ruling Sinhalese until by the late 1970's they were being persecuted by the Sinhalese.

Tamils lived in the north and east of Sri Lanka and in the national capital, Colombo. In 1981, in response to increased repression, Tamil activists ambushed an army patrol in the north killing and wounding a number of soldiers. The Sinhalese authorities responded by burning down the Jaffa Library destroying manuscripts at the heart of Tamil culture dating back over 1000 years.

In July 1983 a wave of violence was unleashed against Tamils for a week by Sinhalese mobs mainly in Colombo. They were believed to have the backing of the government. Around 3000 Tamils were killed and thousands more injured with much property destroyed. Many Tamils fled the capital for the Tamil enclaves in north and east of the island. This anti-Tamil attack was known as Black Friday and marked the start of a cruel decades long civil war. The ICJ described it as genocide.

The civil war came to a bloody end in May 2009, with another act of premeditated violence when fleeing Tamil women and children were trapped on a narrow strip of land near the ocean at Mullivaikkal, Mullaitivu and shelled by the Sri Lankan navy and army. The Tamil armed forces known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), blocked their escape in the hope they might prove protection against the very thing that happened. Seventy thousand were killed. The persecution continues against the Tamils to this day. It took place without comment or condemnation by the Australian government.

The recently deposed President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was Minister for Defence at the time He must have known. The President at the time was another deposed member of the Rajapaksa family, Mahinda. He was Prime Minister until last month. In all another 15 members of the family were appointed to government by the two powerful and compromised brothers.

The Chief of Naval Staff who can be expected to have signed off on the Naval barrage was Admiral Thisara Samarasinghe, who was appointed High Commissioner to Australia in May 2011. The Australian government agreed to his appointment despite his record. In October 2011 the Australian chapter of the International Commission of Jurists accused him of war crimes. The AFP dismissed the allegations.

In June 2009 the AFP opened an office in Colombo with the express purpose of liaising with the Sri Lankan police and navy to prevent people smuggling. They worked with the Sri Lankan CID who were engaged in tracking down, detaining and torturing Tamil asylum seekers. At this time around 250,000 Tamil civilians were held in detention camps, where the

men were subjected to arbitrary beatings, detention and often disappearance, the women and girls were subjected to rape. The rape of women and girls and disappearance of men continues today at the hands of Sinhalese police, soldiers and naval personnel occupying Tamil lands in the north and east.

Also, in June 2009 the Deputy Chief of the Australian Navy, Rear Admiral Davyd Thomas, flew to Colombo to discuss with the navy and the Chief of Sri Lanka's defence force, General Sarath Fonseka, people smuggling. Fonseka also had a dubious record.

At around the same time the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, went to Colombo and on 9 November, 2009, signed an 'agreement' relating to people smuggling. All this Australian activity suggests a certain amount of panic for base and gutless domestic political reasons. Not one of these prominent Australians raised the plight of the Tamil people, they showed no interest, concern or compassion. It was all about themselves, that is, the plight of the Australian ruling elite threatened by hordes of unwashed, ill-educated boat and non-English speaking boat people. No thought was given to establishing an office in the north of the country to process Tamils that might wish to claim asylum.

In October 2009, Prime Minister Rudd, refused to allow rescued Tamil asylum seekers aboard the Customs vessel, Oceanic Viking, to berth and land. The vessel was directed to Indonesian waters. The Indonesians refused them permission to land in Indonesia. Rudd's demands caused a diplomatic row. President Yudhoyono of Indonesia said he was not prepared to do Australia's dirty work. How humiliating. Eventually by mid-November negotiations led to most of the asylum seekers going ashore in Indonesia. A handful went to New Zealand. In early 2010 Rudd froze all asylum seeker applications from Sri Lanka.

What occurred in Sri Lanka and what continues to take place toward Tamils is far worse than anything that has happened to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province of China. And yet the US and Australian governments have not called out the Sri Lankan government over the genocide of Tamils. It is hypocritical.

In February 2013 Opposition front benchers, Julie Bishop and Scott Morrison visited Sri Lanka to discuss 'the refugee situation'. No assistance for Tamils was announced and Sri Lanka's abuse of human rights was not mentioned.

In November 2013, Abbott, as the new Prime Minister, visited Sri Lanka to announce the gift of two patrol boats. Abbott went out of his way to say that Sri Lanka had no problem with human rights which flew in the face of his gift of patrol boats to intercept Tamil asylum seekers.

In February 2014 Julie Bishop as Minister for Foreign Affairs turned up in Sri Lanka to participate in Independence Day. She was followed by Morrison, as minister for Immigration, in July 2014. Morrison handed over the patrol boats against a background of 203 Tamil asylum seekers intercepted at sea. Forty-One of which were illegally 'processed' on the high seas and placed on board a Sri Lankan vessel. The High Court intervened on behalf of the others who eventually found their way to illegal detention offshore. Morrison did a side trip to Jaffna, met with the military governor, who was responsible for the dispossession of Tamils from their land by the forces under his command. In character Morrison refused to meet with members of the surviving Tamil community.

Bishop, like foreign Minister, Bob Carr, described Tamil asylum seekers as economic refugees without any information to back their claims other than statements by Sri Lankan High Commissioner, Smarasinghe; hardly a trustworthy source.

I had an on-going interest in Sri Lanka and the persecution of the Tamils having been posted to Colombo as Deputy High Commissioner in 1994. I was also a Member of the Refugee Review Tribunal from 1995-2000, where included in my case load were the appeal of Immigration decisions relating to Tamil asylum seekers.

In November 2013 I was invited to appear, as an expert witness, before the Second Session of the Peoples Tribunal on Sri Lanka sitting in Bremen from 7-10 December, 2013. A tribunal of eleven eminent judges from around the world unanimously found the Sri Lankan Government guilty of the crime of genocide against ethnic Tamil people. It found the crime of genocide had been and was being committed against the Eelam Tamils as a national group. It is estimated that 140,000 Tamils were killed as soldiers or murdered as civilians since 1983.

I took the opportunity at the hearing to ask Tamils attending from Sri Lanka, at some risk, whether they thought the Australian High Commission was informed and they said yes on the basis that they had provided information and briefings. This raised the question of what had happened to the information. Had the High Commission not sent the information to Canberra or was it sent and ignored? Which would mean that decisions were made regarding the refugee status of Tamil asylum seekers without sufficient if any information. In any case it got worse, my interlocutors said that the High Commission had stopped receiving briefings from Tamils. The full findings and decision of the Tribunal can be found at www.ptsrilanka.org.

The Australian federal Police, based in Sri Lanka, liaise with their corrupt counterparts to prevent people smuggling. It has been alleged that Australia pays the people smugglers not to ply their trade. These smugglers include naval and police officers.

Australia because of its paranoia and the political imperatives woven into the Howard narrative relating to boat people, went to war against Tamils and Tamil asylum seekers. Wrongly, the Australian government was convinced by the Sri Lankan and US governments that members of the LTTE were terrorists. They were not. They were soldiers who fought for Tamil Eelam, a separate Tamil state.

In Australia, ASIO and the AFP maintained links to Sri Lankan intelligence officers attached to the Sri Lankan High Commission. Surveillance, in some cases amounting to harassment, was conducted toward members of the Tamil community in Australia. In 2012 over 50 former members of the LTTE who had been granted refugees status were placed in indefinite detention on a recommendation from ASIO who was reacting to political pressure from the Australian government who in turn were reacting to pressure from Sri Lanka, who used boats as the lever. They were released following a leak to The Age which brought certain facts to light.

The pogrom against Tamil refugees ran from Howard, through Rudd and Gillard, to Morrison and Dutton. It is incredible that Australia threw so many resources into being so irrationally and childishly cruel. The undertaking was racist and ideological. 'We will decide who comes here and when.' Small minded policy put in place by diminished people.

The eighteen year hold on power by the corrupt Rajapaksa regime has come to an end thanks to the starving people of Sri Lanka, to be replaced by the dubious Ranil Wickremasinghe regime. The Sri Lankan parliament does not represent the will of the people. The equally corrupt military will ensure the maintenance of the status quo. It is hard to see the end of the tunnel.

The incredible thing is that successive Australian governments maintained a close and warm relationship with the Rajapaksa regime solely to garner the anti-refugee vote, which the LNP and the MSM, nurtured. It is obscene. History will not be kind. Particularly toward Dutton. In a dawn raid in March 2018, Border Force took a Tamil asylum seeker family from Biloela, the town where they were living and working, into detention in Melbourne, 2000 kms away. A legal battle ensued, supported by many people around Australia including the people of Biloela. Dutton incarcerated the Murugappan family in the detention facilities on Christmas Island, where they were the only occupants. The youngest child, Tharnicaa, got blood poisoning and had to be transferred to Perth for medical treatment, after public pressure the rest of the family was allowed to follow.

If the Labor Party had not been elected to power in May 2022, the family would still be in cruel limbo. As it is they have gone back to Biloela. Dutton has every reason to hang his head in shame.

For domestic political reasons Australia developed a close relationship with a cruel and corrupt regime. The relationship was closer than we had with Pacific nations at that time. The relationship with Sri Lanka represents an abject diplomatic and moral failure matched only by that with East Timor. They represent the depths to which Australia sunk under both the LNP and Labor with respect to foreign policy and human rights. Let us hope under a new Labor government and a new Foreign Minister, Australian foreign policy toward these countries and toward China can be turned around.

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First published in Pearls and Irritations August 8 2022