

Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact (1965)

Signed 24 March 1965 between Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake (UNP) and Federal Party leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam. Renewed under a different government the substantive terms of the abrogated 1957 B-C Pact: reasonable use of Tamil, District Councils, restraint on state-aided colonisation. Substantially unimplemented; the District Councils provision was abandoned within two years under intra-coalition pressure.

The D-C Pact is the second documented post-independence test, this time under a UNP government, of whether the unitary state could negotiate a stable accommodation with the Tamil-speaking polity. Its abandonment confirmed that abrogation was not a one-government, one-party phenomenon: both major Sinhalese-majority parties had now negotiated and walked away from substantively identical pacts under the same kind of internal pressure.

§1 What it agreed

Substantive provisions paralleled the 1957 B-C Pact: (i) the use of Tamil in the Northern and Eastern Provinces under the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act 1958 to be implemented in practice; (ii) creation of District Councils with elected representation and devolved subjects; (iii) priority in state-aided land settlement schemes for landless Tamil cultivators within the Northern and Eastern Provinces, with restraint on out-of-province settlement.

The Pact was again a political agreement, not a constitutional amendment. The District Councils Bill was drafted but withdrawn under pressure from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in opposition and from intra-coalition partners. By 1968 the Federal Party had withdrawn from the governing coalition, citing non-implementation.

§2 Why it failed

The mechanism of failure was nearly identical to 1957: a Sinhalese-majority government that signed the Pact faced organised political and religious mobilisation against its substantive operationalisation, and the government chose to retain office by withdrawing from the Pact rather than to retain the Pact by spending political capital on it.

The 1965 record is decisive for the structural reading because it isolates the variable. The 1957 abrogation had been read by some contemporaries as specific to the SLFP / Bandaranaike government and its political base. The 1965 abandonment under a UNP / Senanayake government, by an SLFP-led opposition, established that the pattern was structural to the unitary state and its electoral incentives, not specific to any one party.

§3 Why it sits at narrowing-step 6

By step 6 the model of pact-making between Prime Minister and Tamil parliamentary leader has been attempted under both major Sinhalese-majority parties and has failed under both. The pathway is closed not by Tamil withdrawal but by majoritarian withdrawal. Subsequent narrowing-steps move to constitutional architectures (1972 Constitution at step 5, 13th Amendment at step 11) precisely because the bilateral pact route has now been exhausted on both sides of the major Sinhalese-majority political divide.

Sources

- DeVotta, Blowback (2004), Stanford UP, ch. 5.
- Tambiah, Ethnic Fratricide (1986), Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Wickramasinghe, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age (2014).

What this is not

- This article is not a brief against any individual signatory or opponent. The structural reading does not depend on character claims about any post-independence leader.
- This article does not assert that pact-making is the appropriate present-day remedy. It documents the closure of that pathway as one step in the Narrowing Timeline.