

Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956 (Sinhala Only Act)

Enacted 5 June 1956 under Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's SLFP government. Declared Sinhala the sole official language of Ceylon, with no provision for Tamil — then the mother tongue of approximately 23% of the population. The single most-cited structural grievance in the post-1956 escalation from federal demand to separatist demand.

The Sinhala Only Act is the foundational example of what Neil DeVotta calls 'linguistic outbidding': the structural ratchet by which Sinhalese-majority parties competed for votes by escalating ethnic-linguistic exclusion of Tamil-speakers. Tamil-speaking civil servants were faced with examinations, demotions, transfers, or dismissal. Tamil became inadmissible in courts, government offices, hospitals, and police stations even in Tamil-majority areas. Two negotiated remedies — the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (1957) and the Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact (1965) — were each abrogated under pressure from political and religious opposition.

§1 What it did

The Act contained a single substantive operative provision: 'The Sinhala language shall be the one official language of Ceylon.' It made no provision for Tamil. Implementing regulations required state employees to demonstrate proficiency in Sinhala within a defined period, on pain of demotion or dismissal. State examinations — including university entrance and civil service competitive examinations — were conducted in Sinhala.

The Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act No. 28 of 1958 partially restored Tamil in administrative use in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. The 13th Amendment (1987) gave Tamil 'official language' status alongside Sinhala. Implementation in the public sector outside the north-east has remained partial and inconsistent — documented across decades by Verité Research and the CPA.

§2 Two pacts, two abrogations

The Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact (26 July 1957) provided for the reasonable use of Tamil for administrative purposes and the creation of regional councils. It was abrogated by the Prime Minister on 9 April 1958 under pressure from Buddhist monks and the opposition United National Party.

The Dudley-Chelvanayakam Pact (24 March 1965) renewed similar provisions under Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake's UNP government. It too was unilaterally abrogated within two years.

The pattern — negotiated accommodation followed by majoritarian abrogation — established by 1965 that no Tamil political demand could be settled within the constitutional politics of the unitary state on a durable basis. This is the structural fact that the Vaddukoddai Resolution (1976) responded to.

§3 Why it sits at narrowing-step 3

The Sinhala Only Act is the first post-independence legislative measure that targeted Tamil-speakers as a group rather than the Malaiyaha community alone (the 1948–49 citizenship acts are steps 1–2). It established the legitimacy template for every subsequent ethnically-asymmetric measure: standardisation (step 5), 1972 Constitution (step 6), Sixth Amendment (step 9), Mahaweli colonisation (step 7). It is the upstream cause without which the rest of the narrowing cannot be read.

Sources

- DeVotta, Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka (2004), Stanford UP.

- Tambiah, Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy (1986), University of Chicago Press, chs. 2–3.
- Wickramasinghe, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History (2014), C. Hurst & Co.
- Verité Research, Language Rights Implementation in Sri Lanka (2014).

What this is not

- This article is not a brief against the Sinhala language or against Sinhala-speakers. The mechanism documented is the legislative exclusion of Tamil in a multi-lingual state; the wrong is structural and political, not ethnic-character.
- This article does not name any individual still living who was involved in drafting, sponsoring, or implementing the Act. Historical political figures (Bandaranaike, Chelvanayakam, Senanayake) appear only because they are the named parties of record in primary sources.
- This article does not aggregate dismissal counts in TLTE voice. Quantitative claims are attributed to DeVotta, Tambiah, or CPA studies.