

Thimpu Talks, 1985 — the Four Cardinal Principles

At Thimpu, Bhutan, in July–August 1985, a Tamil delegation comprising every major Tamil political and armed organisation tabled the Four Cardinal Principles: recognition of the Tamils as a nation; recognition of a Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity; recognition of the right of self-determination of the Tamil nation; recognition of the right of all Tamils to citizenship and fundamental rights. The Sri Lankan delegation rejected all four. The talks collapsed.

Thimpu is the most consequential framework on the narrowing timeline because it is the moment the entire Tamil political spectrum — parliamentary parties, armed groups, civil society — converged on a minimum negotiating position and tabled it openly with India as facilitator. The Sri Lankan state response was to reject the principles outright rather than counter-table. Every later framework (Indo-Lanka Accord 1987, ceasefire 2002, 13th Amendment implementation question, post-war reconciliation architecture) has been measured against whether it accommodates the Four Cardinal Principles or works around them.

§1 The four principles, verbatim

1. Recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality.
2. Recognition of an identified Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity.
3. Based on the above, recognition of the inalienable right of self-determination of the Tamil nation.
4. Recognition of the right to full citizenship and other fundamental democratic rights of all Tamils who look upon the Island as their country.

§2 What rejection meant

The Sri Lankan delegation's rejection of all four principles — rather than counter-tableing on any one of them — is the empirical evidence the narrowing timeline uses to establish that the rejection was structural, not tactical. After Thimpu, every later resolution framework has had to work around principles that the entire Tamil political spectrum had already agreed were the minimum negotiating floor.

Sources

- A. J. Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka* (1988).
- DeVotta, *Blowback* (2004).
- ICG, successive Sri Lanka reports.

What this is not

- This article does not name members of the Tamil delegation. The historical record is publicly available.
- This article does not endorse the political programme of any specific delegation member.