

Sri Lankan anthem sung in Tamil for first time since 1949

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President Sirisena has made moves towards ethnic reconciliation

Sri Lanka's national anthem has been sung in the minority Tamil language at official independence day celebrations for the first time since 1949.

The anthem was also sung in the majority Sinhalese, but the change to the usual procedure angered hardline Sinhalese nationalists.

President Maithripala Sirisena restored the Tamil version as part of moves towards ethnic reconciliation.

It comes seven years after the **end of the war with Tamil Tiger separatists.**

Tamil is the native language for the Tamil people, who constitute about 15% of Sri Lankans, and for Muslims who are nearly 10%.

A group of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim students were seen singing both versions of the anthem in front of Mr Sirisena and dignitaries at celebrations in Colombo.

Some ultra-nationalist groups and Sri Lanka's former President Mahinda Rajapaksa had opposed the decision to sing in Tamil.



Sri Lankan military personnel took part in the celebrations



As did female police officers

The Tamil anthem is an exact translation of the Sinhala version, sung to the same tune, and has existed since Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948.

But the anthem was only sung in Tamil in the Tamil-dominated north and east of Sri Lanka.

In 2010, then President Rajapaksa toyed with the idea of allowing only the Sinhalese version to be sung and this resulted in an unofficial ban on the Tamil version at official events.

Mr Rajapaksa this week criticised the decision to sing in Tamil saying the anthem should be sung in one language only.

He said that even in India where many languages are spoken, the national anthem is sung in only one language.

The Sri Lankan government believes singing in Tamil will boost the post-war reconciliation process.



It is Sri Lanka's 68th independence day celebrations





War with Tamil rebels only ended in 2009

"It is in our constitution, I don't know why people make an issue with this," cabinet minister Harin Fernando told the BBC.

"It's the same song, same tune and same meaning. If it is sung in Tamil, Tamil people will understand the true meaning of it, they will also be part of it.

"When one speaks in one's own language, one is more engaged and takes more responsibility, that is what we need as Sri Lankans," he said.

Tamil Minister Mano Ganeshan said: "Yes, it is a very small act but it goes a long way. This is a victory for our coexistence."

Hardline Sinhala Buddhist groups have reacted angrily, using social media to express their disapproval of the government's decision.