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Constellations of Coresistance: Reflections on Tamil and Palestinian Solidarity from Turtle Island

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Linkages abound between the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip by Israel and the 2009 military onslaught by Sri Lanka on Tamils in Mullivaikkal, a strip of land on Sri Lanka's northeastern shores.

In November 2023, we hosted a discussion in Toronto to consider what transnational solidarity demands of us locally. In the wake of state laws and policies that seek to eradicate racial and ethnic groups, where have our histories and solidarities converged, and where have they branched apart? How do we situate these genocides within the ongoing colonisation of Turtle Island—where we are both presently located—and beyond?

What follows is an excerpted and abbreviated version of that talk.

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How do these genocides connect to each other?

Sujith: One of the most significant connections is the role of international law in contributing to the [current material conditions](#). The crucial question to ask is: how were the Palestinians and the Tamils of the North and East of Sri Lanka (Eelam Tamils¹) racialised? In answering this question, one element is the role of international

¹ Throughout this text, I refer to Tamils from the North East as Eelam Tamils for the following reason: when the self-determination movement(s) started in Sri Lanka, the insurgents were in search of a traditional homeland they coined as Eelam. This term is deeply political and contested, and it is often rejected by those that view Tamil nationalism unfavourably. For me an interesting element is that Eelam gestures back to the failed attempts to achieve statehood. It's a way of remembering what was lost, the lives that were lost – including some of my family members.

law. Focusing on Eelam Tamils, the Portuguese arrived on the shores of the island in 1505. After the Portuguese, it was the Dutch and then it was the British. The British take-over of the Island was on the heels of Napoleon's [Batavian Republic](#). As part of the Treaty of Amiens, Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka) became a British colony. Once British rule was cemented through the [Kandyan Convention of 1815](#), modernisation started with the set-up of administrative structures to extract resources and make Ceylon more accessible for trade. As part of the process of modernisation (and because the British empire was in financial need), they sought to categorise the local population to facilitate the extraction of native labour and resources.

As Ambalavaner Sivanandan noted, the loose '[social formations](#)' endemic to Ceylon at the time shifted to racial (and later ethnic) categories. Even though the modernisation started in 1830s with the reforms brought about by [Colebrooke-Cameron Commission's](#) findings, I would argue that the starting point of our racialisation is 1815 when the Kandyan Kingdom ceded sovereignty to the British in exchange for Buddhism as the island-wide religion. The Colebrooke-Cameron Commission reforms brought about the inclusion of Eelam Tamils, the Kandyan Sinhalese, lowland Sinhalese and the Moors or the Muslims as representatives within the legislative assembly to ensure that the Governor General of Ceylon could rule legitimately. The [solidification of these racial categories](#) is I think the starting point of the conflict between Eelam Tamils and the Sinhalese – that would eventually lead to the genocide in 2009.

Now turning to Palestine, there is a rich history in how colonial forces shaped the ongoing conflict and the theft of Palestinian lands. Folx like [Victor Kattan](#) have unearthed this deep history. And by all accounts, again the British had a significant role to play. The [Covenant of the League of Nations](#) established Mandates A, B and C which included the former colonial possessions of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Palestine was part of Mandate A, and the British were given the task of providing '[tutelage](#)'. Ultimately, with the holocaust and the expansion of Zionism, Palestine could not become a sovereign state. Rather, Israel was forged through the Nakba of 1948 and Palestinian lands were stolen.

The connection that I am trying to tease out here is historical. International law was deployed by colonial powers to shape the local context in Palestine and Sri Lanka. These efforts, over time, has led to the mass violence and genocide that we continue to rail against.

Fathima: Sri Lanka and Israel share longstanding military ties. From [at least the 1990s](#), Israel has sold weapons to Sri Lanka, from fighter jets to missile boats. [In 2000](#), Israel tested its own weapons off Sri Lankan shores. In 2009, during the last stages of the

war in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka government launched an all-out genocide on Tamil people trapped on a beach in the Northern Province. [In 2021](#)—despite an economic crisis that even now is causing starvation throughout the country—Sri Lanka renewed its weapons deals with Israel, upgrading its Israeli-made Kfir fighter jets with new ones, for the cost of USD \$50 million.

So, in this moment of live-streamed mass death in Palestine, the link that is perhaps starkest is how both Israel and Sri Lanka have pursued their respective genocides using the same weapons and the same tactics. This is a gruesome *déjà vu*.

Both massacres are unfolding/ed along a thin strip of beach. [In 2009](#), the UN estimated that over 100,000 Tamil people were confined within three square kilometres at Mullivaikkal, where they were subject to wholesale attack by the Sri Lankan army. This geography of shoreline death adds a Tamil resonance to the chant heard now at Palestine protests around the world: *من المية للمية*, *min il maya lil maya*, i.e. ‘from the water to the water,’ a synecdoche for [‘from the river to the sea.’](#)

In the Palestinian context, Gaza’s geospatial vulnerability is a deliberate consequence of Israeli apartheid. As [Human Rights Watch reported in 2022](#), on the fifteenth anniversary of Gaza’s 2007 imprisonment: ‘The closure has devastated the economy in Gaza, contributed to fragmentation of the Palestinian people, and forms part of Israeli authorities’ crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution against millions of Palestinians.’

In other words, the genocide did not begin last year.

Another similarity between the massacres at Gaza and at Mullivaikkal is the targeted attacks on hospitals, orphanages, and the like. [In 2015](#), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that the Sri Lankan government had received GPS coordinates of most hospital and humanitarian facilities in the area: ‘Attacks on [local] hospitals occurred shortly after the coordinates were relayed. [...] hospital and humanitarian workers alerted military and Government officials to the fact that hospitals were being shelled, and called for the shelling to stop. In some instances, the shelling from SLA [Sri Lankan Army] positions continued, in others the firing was adjusted, suggesting that the SLA was able to control where the shells hit.’

Similarly, [news broke in November 2023](#) that the US had been providing Israel with the GPS coordinates of medical facilities and aids groups in Gaza for weeks, putatively to prevent strikes—despite Israel’s continued bombardment of these humanitarian facilities.

A perhaps less obvious connection is labour. [In November 2023](#), Israel and Sri Lanka announced that Sri Lanka would supply Israel with 10,000 farm workers to replace a portion of the 20,000 Palestinian agricultural workers that Israel had banned

from working in Israel. Israel's exploitation of Sri Lankan (and other global south) workers reflects the widespread [systemic labour abuse](#) of South Asian and African labourers that has been entrenched in law by neighbouring Middle Eastern and Arab countries.

Like many countries in the global south, migrant labour is an essential component of Sri Lanka's GDP. [In 2020](#), the Central Bank of Sri Lanka noted that the Middle East is the primary market for Sri Lankan migrant workers (of all ethnicities), accounting for 80-90% of annual departures for foreign employment and over 50% of total remittances.

Sri Lanka's economy, so deeply in shambles, is highly reliant on desperately oppressed classes of workers, from the indentured labour of [Malaiyaha Tamils](#) in Sri Lanka's tea plantations to the also indentured housemaids and labourers travelling from Sri Lanka and dying at their jobs throughout the Middle East.

Thus, meaningful transnational solidarity demands a firmly materialist analysis of how power and profit accrue across the region. For example, the [United Arab Emirates](#) is funding the genocide that has been unfolding in Sudan for the last year. And Saudi Arabia, [with military support from Sri Lanka](#), Canada, and others, is escalating its long war on Yemen, in retaliation for Houthi support for Palestine.

On the streets, we heed the rallying cry: *none of us is free, until all of us are free.*

How do these genocides connect to Canada and why does that matter?

Fathima: [In 2022](#), Canada exported over \$21 million in military goods to Israel. [In January 2024](#), Canada confirmed it had authorised new permits for unspecified military exports to Israel after 7 October 2023 — ie during the ongoing genocide. [In February 2024](#), Nicaragua served Canada with notice of potential intent to start an action at the International Court of Justice on the basis of its complicity in genocide in Gaza.

Indeed, [L3 Harris](#)—a weapons manufacturer that produces parts used by the Israeli military, including bombs, warplanes, tanks, and warships—has a manufacturing plant right here in Toronto. And not just anywhere in Toronto, but a stones' throw away from Thorncliffe Park and Flemingdon Park. These are the neighbourhoods that I grew up in as a teenage immigrant to this country, neighbourhoods that are among the most impoverished, racialised, immigrant, and Muslim sections of Toronto's downtown core.

Many of the workers at L3 Harris plant are themselves immigrants, and the work is factory work. At [recent Palestine solidarity pickets](#), these workers indicated to

picketers that their jobs were typically limited to piecework. Until the pickets, they had not known what the plant produced, let alone that their labour was being used to manufacture weapons to kill people in places they themselves might call home.

These are the intricacies and interconnections of our oppressions and our resistances. It is at this granular level that solidarity is most meaningfully exercised — in our coming together to resist how our bodies and our labour are used in service of death and colonisation.

Therefore, as people living in Canada who are invested in working towards ending the occupation in Palestine, we must also contend with the fact that Canada itself is predicated on an ongoing genocide of its own. Canada, like Sri Lanka, is the site of [mass disappearances](#), particularly of Indigenous women. Like Gaza, and like Mullivaikkal, the [mass graves](#) of Indigenous peoples—and [especially Indigenous children](#)—pit this country.

[In February 2024](#), at a ‘nonpartisan’ event on Israel, featuring Canadian politicians from across the country, Selina Robinson, a federal minister in Canada’s putatively left-wing New Democratic Party, described pre-1948 Palestine as ‘a crappy piece of land with nothing on it. There were several hundred thousand people, but other than that, it didn’t produce an economy.’

This concept of terra nullius—Latin for ‘empty land’—is no less foundational to Canada’s creation than to Israel’s. It was integrated into the legal concept of the ‘doctrine of discovery,’ which effectively held, from the 1500s onwards, that places in the world not already inhabited by Christians were free for possession by Christian Europeans.

At the event, Robinson said, ‘Here in British Columbia, we’re very focused on reconciliation. If there was a conflict between the Tsleil-Waututh and the Squamish Nations over a piece of land, would we weigh in, [as] regular people? And the answer, is no.’

In Robinson’s formation, it is only settlers who are ‘regular people.’

Crucially, Robinson is telling a base falsehood: the [British Columbia NDP government](#) and the [Royal Canadian Mounted Police](#) are even now engaged in militarised raids on Wet’suwet’en territory, fighting Indigenous resistance to pipeline expansions through their land.

In short, Canada’s complicity in Israeli genocide is both thematic and material. These states rely on each for both discursive and practical support.

Given that state violence is so global, our resistance to it must also be interlinked. Critical opportunities for transformational solidarities are lost when our movements concede the borders that the state both polices and transcends.

As [Leanne Betasamosake Simpson](#) notes in her chapter ‘I am not a nation state’: ‘Indigenous nationhood is a radical and complete overturning of the nation-state’s political formations. [...] This is a manifesto to create networks of reciprocal resurgent movements with other humans and nonhumans radically imagining their ways out of domination, who are not afraid to let those imaginings destroy the pillars of settler colonialism.’

[William Anderson](#) similarly observes: ‘Black anarchism calls for us to abandon state building, including our hopes to reform existing states. This means asking people to reconsider the idea that incremental changes will inevitably lead us to a revolutionary freedom. [...] We can wait until this wretched machinery continues to do its work or we can destroy the gears. The anti-capitalist thrust of abolition cannot be lost. It is capitalism that enables our enslavement in the first place.’

In this way, we are reminded at every turn that our bodies, our lives, and our labour (including its withdrawal and its absence), are inextricably intertwined with the land and with each other. There can be no true liberation that does not account for all these factors.

Sujith: One way to approach this question is to critically think about [my own refugee settler status](#) on the traditional lands of Indigenous people as we bear witness to the dispossession and genocide of Palestinians.

I did not really become aware of my own privileged position as a refugee settler on stolen Indigenous lands until relatively recently. The Canadian racial state is invested in ensuring that [new arrivants](#) (in whatever way they may have arrived in Canada) take up their expected role and space in a manner that benefits the racial capitalist settler colonial enterprise. There is a remarkable ‘[historical amnesia](#)’ of the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the ongoing impacts of these practices in Canada. In this vein, I started to learn of these practices in graduate school and I wanted to connect the experience of Eelam Tamils with that of Palestinians.

When I started my PhD some 15 years ago, my advisor, a German socio-legal scholar, suggested that I think more carefully about my project through case studies. I thought this might be an interesting moment to make a substantial connection between the violence in Eelam and Palestine. With the help of my colleague and [friend Mazen Masri](#), I ended up with an internship in a human rights organisation (Al-Haq) in Ramallah. My internship was slated to start at the end of May 2009, and I decided to leave Toronto on the 17th. I had a layover somewhere in Europe, to catch my flight to Amman, Jordan. I elected to fly to Amman because it would have been safer for me. Even though I have a Canadian passport, my place of birth is listed as Jaffna, and I had various visas to countries that did not have good relations with Israel. So I

decided to skip the Ben Gurion Airport experience. When I was transferring to catch my connection to Amman, I remember being greeted with headlines (and images) of Prabaharan's death. He was the leader of the Liberation of Tamil Tigers of Eelam. The headlines shouted that the civil war was over and the Sri Lankan state had won. It was such a surreal experience and I just couldn't believe it.

I arrived in Amman several hours later and I decided to grab a taxi directly to the King Hussein Bridge. When I got to the bridge, I could only cross into West Bank through a massive checkpoint. Once I got inside the checkpoint, I waited for about seven or eight hours in a room filled with Palestinian men and women, with all of their belongings (some even had their farm animals with them). I was sitting next to this elderly man in his thobe and he had several goats with him. After the long wait, I was finally called up by an Israeli soldier; she seemed like she was 17 years old with a gun strapped to her back that was bigger than her. The soldier wouldn't make eye contact and her acrylic nails kept scratching the gun. Once I got to the counter, she asked me something along the lines of: 'what are you going to be doing at this human rights organisation?' I made a split second decision to mess with her and I think I said something along the lines of 'I'm gonna make coffee and photocopies.' She must have been annoyed with my response and she sent me back to my seat next to the elderly man... who smiled as I returned. I waited a little bit longer and this was the beginning of my experience with the Israeli army.

Once I made my way to Ramallah, the Israeli military presence was quite visible and palpable. When I started to work, I learned that there was a protest every Friday in the Bil'in Village close to the Green Line. A year before, the Quebec Superior Court in Montreal Canada had made a [decision](#) about whether the construction of the Apartheid wall through this village constituted a tort-based war crime. The court decided that it was not the right forum to bring this claim and dismissed the allegations against Green Park, one of the companies allegedly responsible for building the wall. As a domestic Canadian lawyer, I know of so many different doctrines like forum non conveniens (not the right forum) that were sharpened in common law jurisdictions to oust and repel accountability for mass violence. These same types of doctrines were used by the Canadian courts to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their inherent title to their lands by relying on treaties and agreements that they signed with European colonisers. What is striking is that the Canadian courts framed these measures through a paternalist framework, the honour of the crown for example, to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their lands.

The protests that I would go to in Bil'in would get violent. The Israeli soldiers used weapons that they were testing out, before they were sold to other countries. Later, these connections would become even more real. For example, when I taught

international criminal law several years later at Windsor Law, I started the class with the Channel Four video of Sri Lanka's [killing fields](#). The video is a collage of footage taken by the survivors of the genocide on Mullivaikkal. The video contains a short reference to Kfir Israeli fighter jets that the Sri Lankan state used to bomb the civilians, including makeshift hospitals treating the civilians.

In this vein, I think there are important connections between the dispossession of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, the genocide of Eelam Tamils in the North-East of Sri Lanka and the genocide of Palestinians since 1948. The connections are rooted to the role of law, and in particular international law and how these techniques were used to dispossess and eradicate certain peoples.

Where do we go from here?

Sujith: In thinking about the future ahead, there are several lessons that I can identify, especially as we witness to the unfolding genocide in Palestine and [as a refugee settler](#) that continues to benefit from the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

The first lesson is about the role of law, and more broadly international law. Recently, the [International Court of Justice's provisional measures decision on the application of South Africa against Israel](#) noted that there is a high plausibility that Israel's conduct may amount to genocide. Unlike others that have celebrated the ruling, my view is much more cautious. The text from the decision gives us a window into what may lay ahead. First the court suggests that in order for Israel's conduct to amount to genocide, there must be an intent 'to destroy at least a substantial part of the particular group' in paragraph 44 of the decision. Then the court notes the following: 'The Palestinians appear to constitute a distinct 'national, ethnical, racial or religious group', and hence a protected group [...] [emphasis added].' The framing of gravity of the intent to destroy, coupled with the use of the word 'appear' I think points to how the court may decide when it delivers its decision on the merits. This framing of genocide in Gaza has been a [contentious one](#). Israel's genocide is difficult to accept for many progressives, especially those in the legal academy and the Canadian [judiciary](#). Since the ICJ's decision, Israel has continued its bombardment of Gaza and Palestinians continue to die.

The court's lacklustre reasons for not ordering Israel to cease its military operations and attacks on Gaza illustrates the emperors' nakedness, and shows us that '[international law is \[in fact\] dead](#)'. This may be a hard lesson for many of us to accept, particularly for those of us that are victims of international crimes. The turn to law, and international law in particular, must be measured given these realities. We have to

be careful when we suggest that victims of ongoing violence turn to law, especially when the law was the tool by which this violence was made possible.

The second lesson (and a more important one) might be to take stock of the recent Equity, Diversity and Inclusion trends and how these policies have backfired. The countless number of politicians, activists, academics and [others](#) that were accused of anti-Semitism because of pro-Palestinian speech is a good illustration. The backlash against pro-Palestinian support moreover is deployed through the nation state, which has a monopoly on violence and deep pockets. Pro-Palestinian advocacy and activism becomes really difficult, if not impossible.

Fathima's earlier point is an important one: our solidarities are connected and interconnected. As suggested by Frantz Fanon, [Ambalavaner Sivanandan](#) and Himani Bannerji, an internationalist approach to race is one that is rooted to a solidarity beyond the singular identity. Our approach must take account of colonialism, imperialism, racism and sexism. We must also centre the role of capital in producing our contemporary realities. Such an account then demands we build solidarity between Eelam Tamils, Muslim folk, and Black folk, queers and Palestinians. The recent activism of Eelam Tamils in Toronto demanding our politicians take a pro-Palestinian position is a good example.

Coming back to Sivanandan, with all of his faults and romanticism, his astute reflections about [state conduct](#) are relevant. As we think through Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, we have to be alive to how these measures are co-opted and how they are employed in the service of those with power (and those that support Israel). In theorising racial awareness training in Britain, Sivanandan brilliantly demonstrated how the state actively sought to disrupt the solidarities built between Black, Asian/South Asians and people from the Caribbean. The state disrupted the existing solidarities between these groups by giving access to resources to certain groups. Dene scholar Glenn Coultard's [politics of recognition](#) further contributes to our understanding of fragmentation described by Sivanandan. The state, using its policies of recognition identifies (through the judiciary, through the administrative state, etc) particular groups worthy of state funded resources at expense of other groups. This type of recognition can cause distrust and at times violent confrontation. Marginalised people have to engage in 'Oppression Olympics' to access a seat at the table. Of course this is at the expense of other communities' well-being.

This lesson I think is a hard one to incorporate into our everyday life though.

Fathima: [In January 2024](#), Tamil constituents interrupted a Thai pongal (new year) event featuring Gary Anandasangaree, Canada's federal Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations. They said to him: 'As Tamil people, we understand a genocide. [...] The

same thing that happened in Mullivaikkal is repeating itself right now.’ They wanted Anandasangaree to call for a ceasefire in Palestine.

The video of their intervention has gone viral, but Anandasangaree has refused to meet his community’s call or to acknowledge [the open letter](#) they delivered to him in December 2023. In it, over 300 Tamil Torontonians demanded he call for an end to Canada's complicity in Israel's war crimes.



Instead, Anandasangaree deflected his constituents’ questions at the event by launching into what appears to have been the beginning of a land acknowledgement. This is a stark reminder of [Hayden King’s warning](#) that ‘there is a danger of the acknowledgement just becoming that excuse through which these institutions provide themselves permission to be on that territory.’

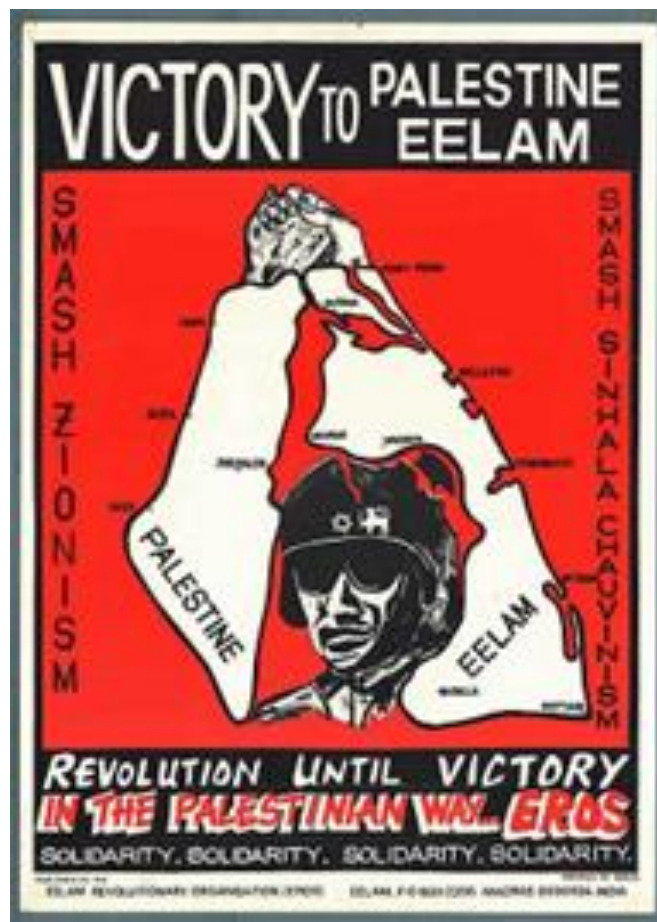
Anandasangaree took to his social media to share a different [interview](#), in which he was asked to respond to criticisms from the Indigenous-led [Yellowhead Institute, who stated in their 2023 annual update](#): “The federal government, for its part, has not completed a single Call to Action [from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ...]. The federal government has more than proven an unwilling partner in meaningful reconciliation and is now attempting to shift discourse toward “economic reconciliation” (a manufactured cooptation that Survivors of Residential Schools have not identified as a goal).’

Under colonialism, capital takes precedence over life, as Sujith notes above, recalling Sivanandan, Coulthard and others.

[On Twitter](#), Anandasangaree quoted his response: ‘As I always say, 134 years of colonisation cannot be undone in a generation. It’s going to take time.’

But growing numbers of Anandasangaree’s constituents and community are unwilling to wait. They do not share that genocidal patience. Their open letter on Palestine calls on his conscience: ‘Choose to be on the right side of history today, before it is too late.’

Tamil solidarity with Palestine, and vice versa, is not new: in the 1970s, while Israel was arming Sri Lanka, the Palestine Liberation Organization was training Tamil resistance organisations and other global south liberation movements. Indeed, this particular link poses difficult and heartbreaking questions about the presently fractured nature of Tamil and Muslim relations in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, that history is our legacy. The choice is ours to claim it as something beyond an exoticised moment in third world struggle.



Anandasangaree knows that history well. He is neither the first nor only Tamil politician in Canada, but his voting base among Toronto's older Tamil community members was built in large part because he was among the most vocal lobbyists against the Tamil genocide. It is because he was once so loudly against genocide that his constituents are calling on him to denounce genocide once more.

We see similar themes in the [October 2023](#) open letter issued to Ahmed Hussen, Minister of International Development, by his cousins. They reminded him that he too had come from war in Somalia: 'Once, we were blinded by our admiration of watching you turn nothing into something, but today we are seeing a sobering truth [...] As a refugee, how can you ignore the ethnic cleansing Palestinians have suffered for over 75 years? [...] restore our faith on who we know you to be and hoped you to be.'

[That same month](#), Arif Virani, the Attorney General of Canada, took Justin Trudeau to a mosque, where he and the Prime Minister both were loudly declaimed by Muslim congregants. [In December 2023](#), over 1,000 fellow Ismaili Muslims wrote Virani an open letter, urging him to call for a ceasefire on the basis of their 'share[d] experiences as refugees, of exile, and multiple colonial displacements.'

In their current roles as henchmen to genocide, apartheid, and colonisation, these BIPOC² politicians are instructive examples of how 'lived experience' and 'representation' are insufficient as guarantees of integrity or courage. Genocidaires come in all colours.

The opposition these politicians are now facing (and wilfully ignoring) from their friends, relatives, communities, and constituents proves Anderson's observation: 'Delaying the question [of liberation] leads to a bewilderment about why we have let them get away with so much, as we're evicted, killed, driven into debt, and stolen from. It means feeling hopeless as election cycles repeat themselves to the point that the gap between promises and realities makes us ill with disappointment.'

Or as [Aimé Césaire](#) put it, 'increasingly, it [the West] takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive.'

And so, [on a grey Sunday in January 2024](#), hundreds of people who have grown tired of that murderous hypocrisy convened outside Anandasangaree's office in Scarborough. This is the working-class, under-resourced, immigrant Toronto suburb from which Anandasangaree, who began his career as a real estate lawyer, has historically drawn his voting base.

The protestors cut across race, ethnicity, and age. Their gathering was reminiscent of [Simpson](#): 'we need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment and profound caring and create constellations of co-resistance, working

² Black, Indigenous and other people of colour.

together toward a radical alternative present based on deep reciprocity and the gorgeous generative refusal of colonial recognition.’

In Arabic and in Tamil—in languages they knew and in languages they were teaching each other for the first time—the people of Scarborough, like millions around the world, made their demand: **பாலஸ்தீனம் விடுதலை சாய்!**

Palestinum viduthalai sai!

Long live Palestine!

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