

# A victory over Sweden's colonialism

Friday 14 February 2020, by [CARL Florian](#), [LAITI Jenni](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2020).

## **A recent court verdict could affect Indigenous rights in Sweden and beyond.**

In late January, the Indigenous Saami reindeer-herding community, Girjas, [won a significant legal battle](#) against the Swedish state. The Swedish Supreme Court legally recognised the Indigenous community's ancestral claim to the land they live on and awarded Girjas Saami Village in Gallivare the right to manage hunting and fishing in its territories without the Swedish state's approval.

This landmark ruling comes amid a climate emergency which threatens the lives and livelihoods of billions of people. Indigenous governance of lands and biodiversity are key measures that can help address the climate crisis. As such, Girjas' fight to take back the control of their lands should be seen as urgent climate action, too.

Indigenous communities the world over have the necessary traditional knowledge and experience to survive and thrive without hindering the future of the planet. Yet, they [bear the brunt of the climate crisis](#).

The dominant lifestyles and politics of countries that are currently in control of ancestral Saami lands, from Sweden and Norway to Finland and Russia, have long been threatening Saami culture, food security, traditional livelihoods and the wellbeing of the lands we all depend on. But the threat is more serious now than it has ever been before because of the ongoing climate crisis.

The ancestral lands of the Saami people make up almost half of Sweden's territories. If it was not for the colonial theft of these lands, Sweden could not have become the prosperous and "progressive" nation that it prides itself to be today.

Sweden is the product of a mentality which sees it fit to exploit Indigenous lands and people to its benefit. And this mentality is still alive and well today in its state-backed extraction industries that deplete Indigenous lands, policies that force Indigenous communities to migrate and persistent cultural genocide efforts such as the eradication of Saami languages that cause invaluable losses and intergenerational trauma.

Despite the victory, the Girjas' court case against the state made it clear once again that Sweden is not willing to acknowledge and address its colonial history.

Throughout the trial, the state tried to frame the issue at hand as an administrative dispute, rather than what it actually is: A people's righteous fight to take back what was stolen from them.

State attorneys even tried to claim that Girjas' Indigenous identity is "[irrelevant](#)" to the case. Emphasising the fact that Sweden has not yet ratified the International Labor Organization Convention 169 on the rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, they argued that "Sweden has no international obligation to recognise special rights for the Saami" and invited the court to assess the case relying solely on the state's own laws, without giving any special consideration to the identity of the Girjas and their connection to the land.

Julia Rensberg, from the Saami youth association Saminuorra, [outlined](#) during the final proceedings of the case last autumn how the state has tried to resolve the dispute through laws and regulations that were unilaterally imposed on the Saami and that fit the state's agenda only. She said it was necessary to "remember who founded those laws and during what time they were founded".

Indeed, the state's lawyer opposing Girjas, Hans Forssell, did not shy away from citing outdated and blatantly racist 19<sup>th</sup>-century documents to legitimise Sweden's non-recognition of Saami rights to land. Asa Larsson Blind, Chairman of the National Union of the Swedish Saami People, responded to the [citation](#) saying "This is quite upsetting. Everybody knows that these texts exist, and the state said that they would no longer support these kinds of statements. I do not understand why they gave weight to them by pressing them into a legal process."

While the lines of argument used by the Swedish state in its case against Girjas were undoubtedly disturbing, they were not shocking to anyone familiar with the Scandinavian state's established attitudes towards Indigenous rights.

Beyond referring to racist 19<sup>th</sup>-century documents in court proceedings and refusing to ratify the ILO Convention 169, the Swedish state also uses a problematic discourse of renewable energy to argue that Saami interests must give way to broader environmental and economic concerns. As Stockholm University's Rebecca Lawrence explained in a [2014 research paper](#), it attempts to make "legitimate the argument that there is, quite simply, more room for wind power 'up north' than in the more heavily populated and industrialised southern areas of Sweden", rendering Saami land uses invisible.

The Swedish state's treatment of the Saami has also been under repeated criticism from international organisations like the [Office of the High Commissioner of the UN](#) and [the Council of Europe](#).

Indeed, we can no longer ignore the problem that is at the core of the ongoing fight against climate change. But climate actions, technologies and Green New Deals cannot achieve sustainable change if they ignore the plight of Indigenous communities, serve colonial interests and help sustain the same harmful systems and mechanisms that we have today.

Countries like Sweden should no longer be allowed to show off their green credentials while actively contributing to the looming climate catastrophe by ignoring the plight of Indigenous communities.

A delegation of Saami and Inuit activists at the COP25 in Madrid last year tried to draw attention to the importance of "land back" movements in the fight against climate change. Julia Rensberg, who was part of the action in Madrid, said:

"The land is us, and we are the land. We are here to stand in solidarity with our Indigenous relatives and we call on you to have our backs! We must come together to break the toxic culture of Green Colonialism that is taking a hold of the environmental movement."

Girjas' victory against the Swedish state should be seen as proof that despite all obstacles, Indigenous communities have the power and resolve to take big and powerful actors to task who stand in the way of sustainable climate action. While it is not clear what this victory would mean for Saami beyond Girjas, the court's decision provides new hope to find communal ways to survive and thrive on this planet.

Indigenous activists from Sapmi in Europe, to the Amazon, and the Wet'suwet'en territory in lands claimed by Canada, are holding the frontline of ecological and social breakdown for all of us.

Through resistance and community organising they are working tirelessly on multiple fronts to dismantle social constructs that feed into Indigenous invisibility, anti-blackness, hetero-patriarchy, and white supremacy. This is the kind of resistance that is key to averting the climate crisis.

Non-Indigenous people must become allies and follow the lead of radical Indigenous visionaries like Girjas. Only then, will there be a real chance for just, democratic and sustainable futures for all of us.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***

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