



Defiance in Remembrance

(Washington, DC/Jaffna; November 27, 2017) Maaveerar Naal, the Tamil National Remembrance Day, falls on the day Lt Shankar became the first member of the LTTE to die in combat in 1982. Eelam Tamils have traditionally marked this occasion as a day of commemoration and solidarity. As in most cultures, the sacrifice of those who died fighting for their nation, and their families, are treated with great reverence. Over the years this day has served as a unifying point across the Tamil nation, both in the homeland and in the diaspora. Not only are the dead mourned on Maaveerar Naal – their commitment to the liberation from oppression is also honoured.

In the North-East of the island, Tamils continue to observe the day, in defiance of the Sinhala nationalist state. Maaveerar Naal observations have increased in scale every year since the end of the armed conflict – this year will see the largest commemoration events since the last Remembrance Day during the time of the LTTE, in 2008. The state's actions in demolishing Tamil war cemeteries and monuments, on the back of horrific mass atrocities, were designed to impose a mentality of being a conquered people on Tamils, demoralizing the population. However, in preparation for this day, Thuyilum Illams were cleared, trees were planted, red and yellow flags decorated streets – despite surveillance and harassment by security forces.

But Maaveerar Naal encapsulates more than just remembrance – it is a reaffirmation of Tamil nationhood and the struggle for the Tamil people's right to self-determination. It is not a coincidence that this is the most-widely observed day in the Tamil remembrance calendar - Maaveerar Naal events draw many more people than any other remembrance observations, despite the increased risks involved. The day also lays bare the vast divide between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil population. Those who died fighting in the war against the state are largely revered by Tamils, while most of the Sinhala population views them as terrorists. Being a "Sri Lankan" still means subservience to Sinhala Buddhism. To this day the Sri Lankan flag remains a rare sight and the Sri Lankan anthem a rare sound in Tamil-dominated areas of the North-East – this is because the Tamil people reject the Sinhala supremacist nature of these symbols of the state.

The current regime continues in the vein of previous governments by strengthening the Sinhala state-building project. Excessive overtures by Tamil political representatives – elected on a platform of Tamil nationalism and self-determination – has only given the state less incentive to act on the core issues behind the long-running ethnic conflict. Failed promises hang over this government's head two years on. The plight of the families of the disappeared, entrenched militarization and impunity for mass atrocities are all issues that remain unaddressed, while the passing of a new constitution dealing with Tamil grievances seems next to impossible.

But while Tamil politicians dither in Colombo-centric diplomacy, Tamil defiance is rising and confronting Sinhala hegemony. Unequivocally, Sinhala Buddhist supremacy dictates the politics of governance. In order for a peaceful, stable and reconciled island however, the fundamental issues surrounding the toxic nature of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, complicity by the majority of the population, and the inherent conflict with the existence of Tamil nationhood must be tackled head-on. Various forms of Tamil resistance to the Sinhala state have continued over the past six decades – and they will continue until the fundamental nature of the Sri Lankan state changes and Tamil people have the right to determine their own future.