



Tamil remembrance on Maaveerar Naal is a bulwark against Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy

Washington D.C.; November 27, 2021 — Maaveerar Naal (Tamil National Remembrance Day) is a day that brings together Eelam Tamils, both in the homeland and diaspora, to commemorate those who gave their lives in the struggle for Tamil liberation from Sinhala-Buddhist oppression. In the recent past, thousands braved harassment and intimidation to gather at the ruins of the war cemeteries demolished by the Sri Lankan military, echoing the rituals that were conducted in areas of Tamil control prior to 2009. However, these last two years have seen an increased crackdown on Tamil memorialization activities, with the Sri Lankan state using judicial and extrajudicial methods to prohibit and prevent commemoration events.

The state's insistence on obstructing Tamil memory is intrinsically linked to the roots of the conflict in Sri Lanka. The commemoration of Maveerar Naal and other remembrance days, such as the Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day on May 18, as well as grassroots protests for accountability and justice, are reflective of broader nationalist sentiments and resistance to the Sinhala-Buddhist state-building project amongst the Tamil population. The brave defiance consistently shown on a large scale across the North-East in commemorating such days, and Maaveerar Naal in particular, is not only an indication of deeply held Tamil nationalist sentiments and sympathies towards the struggle for liberation, it also belies the claims from Sri Lanka that the ethnic conflict has been resolved. Sri Lanka views Tamil remembrance days through the same lens as the virtually unanimous demand for an internationalized accountability mechanism for the Tamil genocide — a threat to Sinhala Buddhist hegemony on the island.

The Sinhala population has attempted to build a Sri Lankan nation that is defined by a Sinhala-Buddhist ethos since its independence in 1948. However, the continued strength of Tamil nationalist identity and the will for dignity, self-determination, and sovereignty shown since independence presents a challenge to Sri Lanka. Therefore, the state consistently seeks to undermine Tamil national identity by cracking down on memorialization activities, employing draconian laws to limit Tamil political expression, stunting Tamil economic growth by channeling access to the North-East through the Sinhala South, and focusing on dismantling the claimed Tamil homeland through land grabs and colonization. Since independence, Sri Lanka's most feared threats are the persistent Tamil claims to nationhood and self-determination.

Decades of economic mismanagement and racist, ethnocentric policies have not only harmed Tamil and Muslim populations on the island, but have also eroded the rule of law and enabled autocratic tendencies that are fundamentally incompatible with the international order. Every year, the commemoration activities around Maveerar Naal are powerful reminders that Tamil nationalist mobilization and the legacy of the armed movement remain one of the strongest bulwarks against Sri Lanka's genocidal nation-building project.