SOVEREIGN PERFORMANCE

European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Funded by the European Union

Call for papers

New scripts, new stages? Rearticulating Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism

Deadline 29 January 2027

Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism has a long history, and scholars have argued that it has always mutated, changing form, cast, and approach. Over the decades, it has adapted to changing local circumstances and global shifts. This call solicits contributions to ***a special journal issue that takes stock of Tamil nationalism today***: almost twenty years after the end of the war; nearly five years after the aragalaya/porattam; two years after the inauguration of Sri Lanka's NPP government; and at a moment in world history where liberal democratic are subject to immense global pressure.

In that pursuit, we ask the following questions:

- What spaces remain available for Tamil nationalism?
- How, where and by whom are Tamil political claims made today?
- How do intra-Tamil dimensions of caste and class get conjugated with political claims around Tamil identity and aspirations?
- How do the views, realities and aspirations from the Malaiyaha Tamil community factor into these political dynamics?
- How are ideas from the Tamil nationalist canon rearticulated in contemporary claims?
- How do the gendered and embodied dimensions of Tamil nationalist (incl political dimensions of food and hunger fasting) become manifest?
- What are the aesthetic dimensions of Tamil nationalist politics?
- How are notions of politics and anti-politics mobilized?
- How do Tamil political claims made by different actors in different spaces influence, amplify or counteract each other?

In answering these questions, we aim to complement the small but rich body of work that has appeared in recent years. This includes analyses that places Tamil nationalism within the broader dynamics of majoritarian Sri Lankan politics and regional geopolitics (DeVotta 2025; Keethaponcalan 2019). Other contributions zoom in on diverse diasporic realities (Chattoraj 2021; Kandasamy et al 2020; Rajah 2023). The present collection seeks to combine depth and breadth by bringing together ***fieldwork-based contributions on diverse Tamil communities*** and their transnational connections.

The special issue takes ***performative politics as a conceptual vantage point***, thus adding a new conceptual framing to contemporary scholarship on Tamil nationalism. By focusing on how political claims are performed, we steer clear of an overly formalistic conception of politics. This allows us to connect apparently disparate political spaces, and it helps redress the "state bias" inherent in the prevalent conceptual language of state legitimacy and democratic politics. It also helps us account for the political energy vested in nationalist or separatist interventions that lack a clear legal or institutional status, but which animate constituencies precisely because of their transgressive and aspirational character.

The collection will take its conceptual cues from a suite of scholarship across anthropology, different sub-fields of international relations and political science, and South Asian studies. This includes some of the seminal work on the performative and symbolics dimensions of politics and statehood (Kertzer 1988; Spencer 2007; Strauss & O'Brien 2007; Taylor 1997), cognate interpretations of citizen's conduct and mobilization (Das 2011; Isin 2017; Wedeen 1999), including the aesthetics dimensions of activism (Mirzoeff 2011) and political humour (Göpfert 2025). Research along these conceptual angles has also focused non-state claims to sovereign agency (Bryant & Reeves 2021), the affective politics of de facto states like Northern Cyprus (Navaro-Yashin 2012), the diplomatic assertions of stateless people (McConnell 2018) as well as the political and militant manifestations of the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist movement (Klem 2024).

As editors, we propose the contours of a theoretical framework without imposing a conceptual straitjacket. Our objective is to pursue an iterative dialogue between theoretical propositions and the contributions to the collection to engage with the conceptual questions underpinning this collection:

- What insights does a performative perspective generate about Tamil nationalism (and the power struggles within it) today?
- What broader patterns and long-durée citational chains does such a perspective expose?
- What limits, ambiguities and pitfalls does such a performative conceptual framework engender?
- How does such a framework facilitate insights that resonate beyond the context of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism?

We take an inductive approach to the empirical focus of the collection. Prospective contributors are thus free propose papers on topics they deem relevant, but phenomena that come to mind include: Tamil party politics in Sri Lanka, diasporic assertions of Tamil representation, memorial practices, marches like the "Pottuvil to Polikandy" walk, protests by mothers of the disappeared, social media activism, political art and theatre interventions, claims in religious spaces, political humour, visuals and political performance, and political aesthetics.

The collection is edited by Bart Klem (Ghent University, Belgium), Sidharthan Maunaguru (University of Toronto, Canada) and Geetha Sukumaran (University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada). What we envisage is a process of sharing initial drafts to be workshopped in a combination on online/offline workshops, with scope for collaborative writing if suitable. We will target a well-reputed journal (the choice of journal will depend on the submissions that we get). This initiative is supported by SovereignPerformance, an academic project run from Ghent University. Funding will be available to cover (some of) the workshop-related travel expenses of selected contributors.

Time planning

- **29 January 2027**: deadline for abstract submission
- February 2027: notification of included papers
- March 2027: securing journal interest
- May 2027: deadline first draft
- June 2027: author's workshop
- September 2027: paper submission
- Summer 2028: target publication date

Instructions for submission

Please send a word document containing the following by ***email*** to one of the editors before the deadline (27 January 2027):

- the proposed **title** of your paper,
- a 200-400 word **abstract**, outlining your proposed argument, empirical material, and theoretical positioning.
- and your **name** and **affiliation**.

We are happy to accept papers that are yet to be written, but we need a clear sense of the material you are working with. Two aspects are crucial for inclusion in this initiative:

1) A substantive focus and a ***conceptual angle*** that resonate closely with the above-discussed ideas.
2) A clear delineation of the ***empirical material*** that your paper will present. While we are open to suggestions, our priority lies with papers that have a clear fieldwork-based foundation (participatory observation, interviews, social media analysis). We are less inclined to accept purely document-based analyses.

References

Bryant, Rebecca & Madeleine Reeves (Eds) (2021) The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination beyond the State. Ithaka, NY: Cornell University Press.

Chattoraj, Diotima (2021) *Displacement Among Sri Lankan Tamil Migrants: The Diasporic Search for Home in the Aftermath of War*. Singapore: Springer.

Das, Veena (2011) “State, Citizenship, and the Urban Poor,” *Citizenship Studies*, 15(3-4): 319–333.

DeVotta, Neil (2025) “Sri Lanka's Peaceful Revolution”. *Journal of Democracy*, 36(1): 79–92.

Göpfert, Mirko (2025) “With and Against Absurdity”. *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale*, 33(4): 125–132.

Isin, Engin (2017) ‘Performative Citizenship’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, edited by Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Bauböck, Irene Bloemraad, and Maarten Vink, 500–523. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kandasamy, Niro, Nirukshi Perera and Charishma Ratnam (eds) (2020) *A Sense of Viidu The (Re)creation of Home by the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Australia*. Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan.

Keethaponcalan, S.I. (2019) *Post-war Dilemmas of Sri Lanka: Democracy and Reconciliation*. London: Routledge.

Kertzer, David (1988) *Ritual, Politics and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Klem, Bart (2024) *Performing Sovereign Aspirations: Tamil Insurgency and Postwar Transition in Sri Lanka*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas (2011) ‘The Right to Look’. *Critical Inquiry* 37 (3): 473–496.

McConnell, Fiona (2018) ‘Performing Diplomatic Decorum: Repertoires of “Appropriate” Behavior in the Margins of International Diplomacy’. *International Political Sociology*, 12(4): 362–381.

Navaro-Yashin, Yael (2012) *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rajah, A.R. Sriskanda (2023) *Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka Counter-history as War after the Tamil Tigers*. London: Routledge.

Spencer, Jonathan (2007) *Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strauss, Julia C. and Donal B. Cruise O’Brien (2007) *Staging politics: power and performance in Asia and Africa*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Taylor, Diana (1997) *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wedeen, Lisa (1999) *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.