

<https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/185105>

2/26/2023

# Suppression of Public Commemoration is an Early Warning of Authoritarian Abuse of History

News Abroad

tags: [Tiananmen Square](#), [authoritarianism](#), [public history](#), [commemoration](#)

by Ruben Zeeman

*Ruben Zeeman is the co-editor of the [Network of Concerned Historians](#).*



Police cordon near Victoria Park, Hong Kong, enforces prohibition on a vigil observing the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

Detail from photo by [Studio Incendo](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)

[According to the Annual Reports of the Network of Concerned Historians](#), at least fifty-three cases of state-led suppression of commemorative events took place between 2015 and 2022. Not surprisingly, most of these, seventy-seven percent, took place in authoritarian regimes. Two other characteristics are more surprising. First, in less than one-fifth of the cases were restrictions imposed by so-called memory laws which prescribe or prohibit certain expressions about the past— whereas in sixty-four percent they were backed and penalized through legislation unrelated to memory (e.g. as incitements to public disorder or threats to public health). In another seventeen percent the government simply resorted to violence, sometimes backed up by legislation afterwards.

Second, of the fifty-three cases of suppression, more than half (twenty-seven) took place in Asia, and another thirteen in Turkey, the Russian Federation and the Middle East. Of these, I will outline here four examples: the suppression of the commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Hong Kong; the crackdown on commemorative events related to the 2011 Bahrain Uprising; the restrictions on the commemoration of Tamil victims of the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009); and the wide array of “sensitive commemoration days,” during which human rights activists were put under house arrest in Vietnam.

Despite their diversity, these examples hint at two shared characteristics: the correlation between suppression and political legitimacy based on a specific interpretation of the past, and the potential for commemorative suppressions to function as a warning signal for the abuse of history.

Commemorations of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre had long been banned in mainland China. On June 1, 2020 Hong Kong police banned the annual June 4 vigil at Victoria Park for the first time, officially citing health concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the ban, tens of thousands of people still came to Victoria Park, of which some, including Joshua Wong and Jimmy Lai, were arrested and charged with taking part in an “unauthorized assembly.”

In 2021, police again barred the vigil on the grounds of social distancing restrictions related to COVID-19. In the lead-up to the commemoration, the June 4 Museum—the only museum dedicated to the massacre, established in 2012 by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China (HKASPDMC)—was forced to close. Police again arrested a number of demonstrators, including Chow Hang Tung, vice chairwoman of the HKASPDMC, who had called on people to commemorate the anniversary in their own way.

In 2022, for the third year in succession, authorities banned the vigil, this time threatening prosecution on the grounds of “incitement.” It was the first time that the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong decided against holding a memorial mass, after its 91 year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen had been imprisoned on charges of collusion with foreign forces. Accompanying the prohibition of the vigils was the authorities’ announcement of new textbooks for secondary students in Hong Kong, in which most mentions of the massacre had been erased and nothing was said about the annual vigil in Victoria Park. Research by the Hong Kong Free Press showed that between 2010 and 2021 twenty-nine books about the massacre had been removed from public libraries, and of the remaining 120, only twenty-six were displayed and immediately available for borrowing.

Elsewhere, in Bahrain, a series of protests erupted against the authoritarian rule of King Hamad Al Khalifa and his family between February 14 and March 18, 2011, coinciding with the wider wave of protests known as the Arab Spring and lingering on until 2014. Afterward, authorities began to repress commemorations of the protests. In February 2016, the Chief of Public Security issued a warning against any kind of celebration of the five-year anniversary, because of “security threats from Iran-backed elements and militants linked to Islamic State.” On the day of the anniversary, police forces attacked people participating in commemorations, suppressing at least thirty-three events and arresting eighty-nine people.

Police in Hamad Town interrogated the fifteen-year-old Jameel J. about his participation in the observation of the ninth anniversary of the protests on February 14, 2020. On February 11, 2021, three other children, ages 16 to 17, were also arrested for their participation in demonstrations held in 2020. At the Criminal Investigation Directorate in Manama, they were reportedly beaten, threatened with rape and electric shocks, and refused access to their lawyers or parents. After international pressure, they were sentenced to a six-month suspended prison term.

Both in China and Bahrain, the suppression of commemorative events is intimately linked to the ways in which the respective leaders construct their political legitimacy. The demands for democratization exemplified by the Tiananmen protests are diametrically opposed to the self-fashioning of Xi Jinping as the avatar of stability, which shows increasing elements of a personality cult. In Bahrain, commemorations of the 2011 protests and their pleas for democratization and increased freedom for civil society undermine the continuous rule of King Al Khalifa.

[The same was the case in Sri Lanka under the rule of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa](#), who had been the top defense official during the Sri Lankan civil war and campaigned in the 2019 elections on a platform of protecting “war heroes” from prosecution. Once in power, he banned any commemoration of Tamil victims. As a result, in 2021, under the pretext of COVID-19 related health concerns, Tamil parliament member Selvarajah Kajendran was arrested for commemorating a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), relatives of deceased LTTE-members were forced out of cemeteries by armed troops when they tended their graves, and, on November 29, a group of Tamil journalists covering a commemoration in Mullaitivu was assaulted by soldiers.

The crackdown on commemorations was accompanied by the pardoning of those few members of the armed forces who had been held accountable for human rights violations against Tamils, increased surveillance and threats against human rights defenders by security and intelligence agencies, and the country’s withdrawal from commitments, set by the United Nations Human Rights Council, to provide justice and accountability for war crimes and other grave violations.

Since July 2022, Rajapaksa has been replaced by Ranil Wickremesinghe, after countrywide protests sparked by an economic crisis. However, Wickremesinghe does not seem to have made significant changes to his predecessor’s mnemonic policies towards the Tamil people.

In no other country is the scope of prohibited commemorative dates as extensive as in Vietnam. [Research by Human Rights Watch in February 2022](#) found at least twelve anniversaries on which human rights activists were put under house arrest. Some of these were religious. The Hòa Hảo Buddhist practitioners who refused to join state-sanctioned

churches were subject to house arrest at least four times a year: the founding day of the Hòa Hảo religion (July 4, 1939) and the anniversaries of the birth (January 15, 1920), disappearance (March 18, 1947), and death (April 16, 1947) of its founder Hunh Phú Sô.

Other anniversaries were prohibited due to the historically complex relationship with China, including January 19 (commemoration of the 1974 Battle of the Paracel Islands between naval forces of South Vietnam and China); February 17 (commemoration of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war); March 14 (commemoration of the 1988 Gac Ma battle); and October 1 (China Independence Day). Lastly, some national holidays were accompanied by house arrest orders: on April 30 (commemoration of the end of the 1954–1975 war); June 26 (United Nations International Day in Support of Victims of Torture); September 2 (Vietnam National Independence Day); and December 10 (International Human Rights Day). State-led restrictions on memorial practices have become so common that in recent years house arrests were even enforced on weekends following public protests.

State-led suppression of commemorative practices is a highly diverse type of historical censorship. Yet, an analysis of the cases between 2015 and 2022 shows that some cautious conclusions can be drawn. First, the gravitational center of suppression in recent years lies in Asia. This is contrary to most of the research on history politics that focuses on Europe and to a lesser extent Latin America. Second, although in some cases states design memory laws to suppress commemorative practices, in the majority of cases non-history related legislation is invoked for their suppression, or a legal justification is only formulated after the fact. Lastly, commemorative practices, like historical work in general, are considered especially threatening when they have the (perceived) potential to undermine the carefully constructed interpretation of history that functions as one of the foundational pillars of a political reign. By extension, once a regime begins to interfere with commemorations, it should be an early warning that history is at risk of abuse.