



Commentary

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Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Peaceful Coexistence Under Attack

The lethal Easter bombings in Sri Lanka have stunned a country still recovering from decades of internal war. Political and religious leaders alike should reject the rhetoric of collective blame and reaffirm the island's strained but living tradition of intercommunal amity.

Sri Lankans from all ethnic and religious groups – Sinhalese and Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and Hindu – lived through terrible violence during the decades of war and terrorism that ended ten years ago. Still, no one was prepared for Easter Sunday's atrocities, whose death toll – now over 300, with more than 500 injured – and degree of organisation make them Sri Lanka's worst-ever terror attack. The damage to the country's already torn social fabric is likely to be immense.

Amid the shock, grief and anger, there is also bewilderment. For many, the attacks seem to have come from nowhere. The government has arrested twenty-four Sri Lankan Muslim suspects, allegedly part of a hitherto little-known Islamist militant group, National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ), which government officials have said carried out the attacks with foreign support.

Sri Lanka has a long and complex history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence. Political struggles between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese and mostly Buddhist majority and the mostly Hindu Tamil minority, who make up about 15 per cent

of the population and are concentrated in the north and east of the island, eventually led to a three-decade civil war, which left some 150,000 dead (a small minority of both Sinhalese and Tamils are Christians). Soon after the government crushed the Tamil Tigers' separatist struggle in May 2009, Sri Lanka's Muslim community – about 10 per cent of the population – became the target of violence, hate speech and economic boycotts by groups of Sinhalese Buddhists who claimed that Muslims threatened the island's stability and Buddhist character. (Historically, Sri Lankan Muslims have been considered and considered themselves a separate ethnic group, but increasingly their identity is defined in religious terms as well.) Nearly a week of anti-Muslim rioting by Sinhalese mobs in March 2018 was contained only after the government declared a state of emergency and deployed the army.

In the face of years of sustained attack, Sri Lanka's Muslims have displayed calm and restraint, with not a single act of retaliation against Sinhalese. Nor is there any history of serious tension between Muslims and Christians. Indeed, recent years have seen unusual joint advocacy campaigns by Muslim and evangelical Christian groups, as the latter have also suffered violent attacks by militant Buddhists angered by what they see as "unethical conversions".

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Extremist voices have emerged in recent decades among Sri Lankan Muslims, but the limited violence such groups have committed has hitherto been against other Muslims, not Christians or Buddhists. NTJ, for instance, was one of a number of Salafi groups known and criticised for its violent rhetoric and occasional physical attacks on Sufi Muslims, whom it considers not to be true Muslims. Until very recently, however, there were never attacks against Sri Lankans of other faiths. In part for this reason, the police and Sinhala political leadership largely deferred to Muslim political and religious leaders, who did little to challenge such groups.

The first sign that NTJ’s targets might be changing came in December 2018 when Buddhist and Christian statues were vandalised in the central town of Mawanella. Police quickly arrested a group of young Muslim men who reportedly had attended Quran classes taught by the NTJ leader and Salafi preacher M. T. M. Zahran. Worries grew among Muslim community leaders, who were struggling to keep the peace, when police investigations into the statue attacks led to the discovery in January of a weapons cache hidden on a farm in north-western Sri Lanka.

The Easter attacks appear principally to be the fruit of seeds planted by transnational jihadists, which responsible local Muslim leaders failed to effectively uproot. A small number of Sri Lankan Muslims are known to have travelled to Syria to fight with the Islamic State (ISIS). The scale and complexity of the attacks suggest that a small number of local radicals received outside guidance. ISIS has now laid claim online to what it calls Sunday’s “blessed raid”. In statements released over social media, it has celebrated the killing of Christians and “subjects of the countries of the Crusader Coalition” that has combated the group globally.

ISIS aims to eliminate any space for tolerance and coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims, and to draw Muslims everywhere into the group’s cataclysmic battle with “infidel” and “apostate” enemies.

Sunday’s atrocities thus do not appear to grow directly from Sri Lanka’s previous complicated history of intercommunal tensions and political violence, though years of pressure on Muslims from Sinhala Buddhist militants have increased the alienation and anger felt by many young Muslims. Now, however, the attacks will likely become an essential part of Sri Lankan conflict dynamics and – as interpreted from within that history and made use of by multiple political actors – could go on to have lasting and destabilising effects. The bombings, shocking in their large number, brutality and high death toll, will now be cited as evidence of the violent Muslim extremism of which militant Buddhists have long warned. The anger felt by Christians – both ethnic Tamil and Sinhalese – at the massacre of their brothers and sisters threatens to strengthen already powerful anti-Muslim sentiments across society.

The attacks will also strengthen the hand of the Sinhala nationalist opposition, led by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother, and would-be presidential candidate, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, during whose government militant Buddhist organisations such as Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) were allowed to incite violence against Muslims with impunity. Already the front runners in the presidential and parliamentary elections due over the next year or so, the Rajapaksas and their party supporters are certain to argue that during their government, terrorism – in the form of the Tamil Tigers – was defeated, and that only they can save Sri Lanka from the latest brand of terror that the divided government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has failed to prevent. The government’s apparent failure to act on intelligence reports warning of the suicide attacks seems to have been at least in part a product of the bitter political infighting between the president and

prime minister and the former's refusal to share police warnings with the cabinet. It has deepened the widespread sense that the government is weak and the country at risk.

Should the Rajapaksas return to power, the current government's modest efforts at post-war reconciliation and strengthening the rule of law will almost certainly end. Already, in response to the attacks, the president has declared an emergency that provides broad powers of arrest and detention to the security forces, and plans to replace the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act – long criticized by the UN and others for facilitating torture of Tamil detainees – are likely to be scrapped.

Thorough investigations and tightened security measures are essential to reassure a frightened public. The capital Colombo in particular remains tense, with reports of rising anger toward Muslims, particularly after ISIS's claim of responsibility and police warnings of possible further bombings. A serious and independent inquiry into the failure to act on intelligence warnings must lead to reform of Sri Lanka's dysfunctional system of intelligence sharing.

Muslim leaders, in turn, need to speak out much more forcefully against the forces of hate within their own community that they have until now been reluctant to challenge. The fear

of giving ammunition to their antagonists in other communities, which is one reason they have held back, can no longer be accepted. Continued silence, instead, is the greater danger.

Yet at the same time, efforts are needed to avoid demonising Sri Lanka's overwhelmingly peaceful Muslim community. The alternative would be to erode the authority of Muslim leaders who themselves are horrified by the violence, and wish to contain it, and deepen the sense of alienation that some young Muslims already feel. Intercommunal conflict and schism is precisely what ISIS hopes to provoke. Instead, leaders from all ethnic and religious communities must speak out against holding Muslims as a whole responsible for atrocities that a very small number of their community may have committed. All must work to protect Muslims from reprisals that could eventually set off a deadly cycle of intercommunal conflict. In addition to the Christian community that was the direct target of the bombings, what was attacked was Sri Lanka's strained but still living tradition of inter-religious and inter-ethnic cooperation and friendship. This tradition must be defended in every way possible by Sri Lanka's political, national security and religious leadership.