

THE OTHERING OF SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS

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 Analysis

Sri Lanka's brief history of conflict

Sri Lanka has been involved in ethnic conflict since the country - formerly known as Ceylon - became independent from British rule in 1948. The three largest ethnic groups in Sri Lanka are the Sinhalese majority, Tamil minority (about 13 percent of the population), and Muslim minority (almost 10 percent). In the years following the country's independence, the Sinhalese, who resented British favoritism toward Tamils during the colonial period, made Sinhala their official language. This is followed by the tensions between Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities that grew with time. In 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, and it began to campaign for a Tamil homeland in the northern and eastern part Sri Lanka, where most of the island's Tamils reside. In 1983, the LTTE ambushed an army convoy, killing 13 soldiers and triggering riots in which 2,500 Tamils died.

India, which has its own Tamil population in the south, deployed a peacekeeping force in 1987 that left three years later amidst escalating violence.

The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and LTTE has lasted for nearly three decades. Commonly known as the Tamil Tigers, LTTE wanted an independent state for the island's Tamil minority. The European Union, Canada, United States, India, and Australia labeled LTTE as a terrorist organization, which made it more difficult for the group to get financing from abroad. The civil war killed nearly 70,000, and watchdog groups have accused both LTTE and the Sri Lankan military of human rights violations, including abduction, extortion, and the use of child soldiers. In its final weeks, around 40,000 people - mostly Tamil civilians - were killed, bringing the war's total casualty to more than 100,000 from a population of around 20 million. Following a year of fierce



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military offensive, the Sri Lankan government claimed in May 2009 that it had defeated the separatist group and killed its leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran.

Muslims as Minority

Sri Lanka's history has always been rich due to its pluralism. The country, being an island at the center of trade routes, is home to a diversity of faiths. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have been practiced side by side for a long time.

Sri Lanka has nearly 10 percent Muslim minority population, who are predominantly ethnic Tamils. Sadly they have been at the margins of recent conflicts in Sri Lanka. They are also excluded as Tamil speakers, but at odds with the more numerous Hindu Tamils. However, they also have long been subject to Sinhalese persecution, with anti-Muslim riots dating back at least as far as the early 20th century. As the Tamil Tiger war progressed, Sinhalese Buddhism grew more radicalized. Some Sinhalese claimed that the entire Sri Lanka should be exclusively Buddhist. With the Tamil Tigers defeated, Sri Lanka's non-Buddhist communities were again persecuted. This culminated in 2013 with a Buddhist attack on a mosque. Anti-Muslim riots in 2014 resulted in a ten-day state of emergency. Last year, more anti-Muslim riots were waged. Buddhist monks have also disrupted Christian church services. So it is safe to say that Sri Lanka's history of extremist violence is far from new; where Sinhalese Buddhist prejudice has been the driver of much of this conflict.

Though the Muslim community has been a frequent target of both Tamil separatists and Sinhalese forces, there is little history of Islamist violence in Sri Lanka as compared to Buddhist and Tamil extremism. In a few isolated cases, response from Muslims has been directed only at those who attacked first. There has never been violence between Muslims and Christians as such. Since the Tamil insurgents were defeated, Sri Lanka's Muslim community has often found itself filling that role of an imagined threat.

Buddhist extremist organizations have spread rumors on social media and elsewhere that Muslim businesses were secretly sterilizing Sinhalese women through medicated food and underwear. These stories, as strange as they are, have resulted in the arson of Muslim businesses, attacks on mosques, and the persistent harassment of Muslim Sri Lankans. There is an unverified assumption that money from Saudi Arabia is used to build madrassas and mosques and this money is being sent to promote Wahabism in Sri Lanka. Though Islamic practice in Sri Lanka may have grown somewhat more conservative in recent years, there is no such evidence which could prove the alleged violent radicalization of the Sri Lankan Muslim community. So what happened then, to the Colombo Easter bombings?

Easter Bombings and Muslim Fears

Easter Day bomb blasts at three Sri Lankan churches and four hotels killed 259 people and wounded hundreds more, following a rather peaceful-terror free environment, since the end of the civil war 10 years ago. On the Sunday of 21st April 2019 attack, a string of explosions occurred at three luxury hotels frequented by foreigners and three churches holding Easter services in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, as well as Negombo in the north and Batticaloa in the east. Another 15 people, including six children, died on the following Friday in the country's Eastern province after soldiers raided a house in search of suspects. Attacks took place in the capital's historic St Anthony's Shrine church. The three hotels hit in the initial attacks were the Shangri-La, Kingsbury Hotel and the Cinnamon Grand, all three located in Colombo. The first six explosions were all reported within a short period in the morning just as church services were starting. Hours later there were two further attacks in the outskirts of Colombo. The explosions led to an immediate clampdown, with the government declaring a curfew and blocking access to most major social media and messaging sites. Sri Lankans have lived through a brutal 30-year civil war and two

violent insurrections, but the last 10 years saw a comparatively peaceful era. Now the bombings have revived painful memories and a sense of new fear has evolved. Authorities in Sri Lanka had received warnings about the attacks about two weeks prior, Sri Lankan Minister Senarathne said at a news conference. The New York Times reports that tensions over the status between Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena were at least partly responsible for an error in communicating the warnings.

The government blamed a tiny militant Islamist organization, the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NJT) and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim, while the Islamic State has claimed joint responsibility. NJT is a previously little-known extremist Islamist group that appears to have surfaced over the past year or so in Sri Lanka, mainly in response to anti-Muslim riots and other violence against Muslims inflicted by the island-state's majority Sinhalese Buddhist population.

After the Easter attacks, the country's Muslim communities are living in fear, though they share the nation's shock and grief. Mosque leaders stopped broadcasting prayer calls over loudspeakers to avoid offending mourners. They were quick to put up banners with messages of condolence for the victims. They met with Catholic Church and police officials, and packed food kits for funeral volunteers. Despite these acts of sympathy to the victims, Muslims still fear a wave of anger and possibly violent retaliation that has begun to emerge. Hateful online messages blaming Muslims for the attacks had evaded the government's emergency social media ban, and stones had been thrown at several Muslim homes and businesses. Rampaging mobs from the majority Buddhist population attacked Muslim communities, police and witnesses said, igniting fears of a new phase of violence in Sri Lanka following the Easter church bombing. The new attacks occurred in a cluster of towns in the country's northwest, where many Muslim minorities own shops and other businesses.

The mobs ransacked homes, burned vehicles and looted shops. They vandalized mosques, burned Qurans and urinated in water stored for ablutions, reports said. Sri Lankan police arrested 23 people on 7th May in connection with the increased attacks on Muslim-owned homes and shops in apparent revenge for the Easter bombings. Mobs moved through towns in Sri Lanka's northwest using dozens of motorbikes and buses, ransacking mosques, burning Korans and attacking shops with petrol bombs, reports said. Reuters reported that in the town of Kottampitiya, a group of about a dozen people arrived in taxis and attacked Muslim-owned stores with stones just after midday on the following Monday. They attacked the main mosque in the city, 17 Muslim-owned businesses and 50 homes.

Eight Muslim government officials in Sri Lanka were eventually forced to quit their portfolios on 3rd June in solidarity with the Minister of Industry accused by the opposition of supporting Islamist militants. Muslim leaders said there is growing persecution against them on the majority Sinhala Buddhist Island. The resignations undercut a planned no-confidence motion led by supporters of nationalist former President Mahinda Rajapaksa against Minister of Industry Rishad Bathiudeen, who also resigned from the Ministry on Monday, making the motion unviable. Bathiudeen's accusers have not provided evidence for their accusations. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, head of the hardliner Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or "Buddhist Power Force", threatened to press for national protests if the men were not sacked. Gnanasara had been serving a six-year sentence for contempt of court, but was freed thanks to a presidential pardon. Despite public rallies and hate speech being prohibited under emergency laws, no arrests were made. This sets a disturbing precedent, especially in Sri Lanka, where the repeated violation of the due process rights of minorities and political dissidents has directly contributed to Sri Lanka's decades of extreme political violence.