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The terror attacks that claimed the lives of over 250 people in Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo and the eastern city of Batticaloa have left local and international analysts wondering what lies ahead. The extremist Islamist group that claimed responsibility for the attacks, National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), is a relative unknown in Sri Lanka. The motivation for the bombings, ostensibly in response to the killing of Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, begs the question of whether Sri Lanka can expect more such attacks and whether the country will fall back into an unending spiral of violence. In this brief, we assess the history of extremism in Sri Lanka, the implications these attacks have for stability there, and their potential regional impact.

A History of Extremism in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a long history of extremist terrorism. The most notable group is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of several armed separatist groups that emerged in the 1980s when Sri Lanka's political leaders proved incapable and unwilling to address the grievances of the country's sizable Tamil minority. The LTTE are often considered the originators of the modern-day suicide bomb. Their struggle for an independent Tamil state ended in large-scale defeat nearly a decade ago. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a group responsible for two anti-government revolts in the 1970s and 1980s, subjected Sri Lanka to Marxist violence.

Previous violence targeting Christians has largely been connected to anti-colonial struggles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was later transformed along ethnic rather than religious lines. Indeed, relations among Christians within the same ethnic group were far more amicable than among Christians who [cut across ethnic lines](#). Since the early 2000s, [Buddhist nationalists](#) initiated new waves of violence, centring on the view that Christians (who total just seven per cent of the country's population) are a threat to the identity of the Sinhalese and by extension, the island. In fact, a campaign to outlaw conversions from Buddhism was intertwined with attacks on churches in 2004. Such attacks on proselytizers and those who support them are not unique to Sri Lanka. Indeed, there has been an uptick in violence against Christian minorities throughout South and Central Asia.

Anti-Muslim Sentiment

Violence in Sri Lanka since 2009 has mainly been carried out by Sinhalese nationalists who cling to the idea that the island belongs solely to Buddhists. One of the more notorious groups, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), an extremist Sinhalese Buddhist organization, was responsible for the 2014 anti-Muslim riots.

Muslims make up just over nine per cent of Sri Lanka's 21 million people, compared to over three-quarters of the population who identify as Sinhalese. Most speak Tamil and roughly 40 per cent of the total population resides on the east coast, in cities like Batticaloa and Trincomalee, typically Tamil-dominant areas. However, many Muslims fled and were dispersed throughout the island as a result of the long civil war that saw the expulsion of 75,000 Muslim residents of the northern region at LTTE gunpoint. Their displacement created a heterogenous Muslim community with



varying job descriptions in urban areas, while those on the coast worked on rice farms. Muslims were left out of the peace processes that occurred during the civil war and the reconciliation attempts afterward, although they weren't immune to the desire for an autonomous territory.

During the decades-long separatist war, government policies that were designed to favour the Sinhala language and peoples captured Tamil-speaking Muslims within their parameters. On its face, this would make the ethnic Tamils and Muslims natural allies; however, the government and the warring Tamil Tigers took turns violently clashing with these groups while occasionally recruiting, funding and supplying Muslim residents when it suited their strategic aims. The LTTE would often justify their acts against Muslims by claiming there were jihadist elements among them.

After the abrupt and violent end to the civil war in 2009, the government consolidated its power by enacting repressive measures against both the Tamil and Muslim populations. Since the war, the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, often with ties to the government, have turned their ire against the Muslims in the country. Targeted campaigns of anti-Muslim violence were propagated by Buddhist nationalists in 2014 and the [Facebook-enabled](#) spread of false information and incitements to violence fomented certain rhetoric that led to riots in March 2018. Muslim businesses and houses were set aflame and at least two people died in both cases. Nationalist [destruction of mosques](#) and a 400-year-old Muslim shrine had begun just two years after the civil war.

Many in the international community, as well as a majority of Sri Lankans, criticize the slow pace of reconciliation in the island country. Surprisingly though, [according to surveys conducted on the island](#), the people most satisfied by the progress the current government has made on this file are Muslim Sri Lankans. The same population is by far the largest supporters of democratic rights and supportive of state-run services. It holds then that the wider Muslim community is not disillusioned by a Sinhalese-dominated state.

Radical Islam on the Island

Sri Lanka's Islamic community is diverse in sect and culture. Moors, a colonial term for the Islamic-practising ethnic Sri Lankans, remain the largest demographic, with Malays and Indian Muslims also making up notable proportions of the population. Sufi traditions still constitute the principal practice, typically within the Shafi'i school – a Sunni Islamic jurisprudence sect. However, Tabligh Jama'ath and other orthodox variations of the faith have grown since the 1980s.

Islamic radicalism on the island was a slow festering movement that has struggled to draw many supporters. Scholars and commentators have [previously](#) noted the potential for radicalism to gain a foothold within the island's Muslim population due to [frustrations inside](#) the country and outside influences. In particular, there has been an organizational presence in the country since at least the 1940s with external support that sought to ensure strict adherence to a more fundamental version of Islamic teachings. This has caused some quarrelling among the community itself; fundamentalists have infringed on Sufi practices, which their version of Islamic teaching sees as inadmissible.



Through intelligence channels, India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) has warned of threats from this type of extremism, including warnings about an [organization](#) labelled [the "Osama group"](#). However, the intelligence often detailed resentments emanating from Muslim youth who directed their anger toward the Tamil Tigers – an indication that the government could most likely ignore such cautions. Islamic ties to anti-LTTE cadres also took the form of the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), a Tamil separatist unit funded by Palestinian liberation groups, that eventually folded, with the remaining members siding with the Sri Lankan government.

Rumours about a growing Wahhabi influence on the island – with some experts in the country providing evidence of [Osama bin Laden's speeches translated](#) into the Tamil language – were always tenuous. However, dissatisfaction among some in the Muslim community may have further been ingrained after the 2014 riots. Groups like the NTJ have been pegged for destroying Buddhist statues and monuments in recent years, potentially trying to draw upon the growing dissatisfaction with the government's ability to protect the community, or a sense of their outright complicity.

Soon after the Easter attacks, video of the NTJ suicide bombers was released showing the eight militants, including its leader Zahran Hashim, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (IS). The group is said to have splintered from a similar group, Sri Lanka Thowheed Jama'ath (SLTJ), in 2014 in reaction to the anti-Muslim riots. NTJ's leader is believed to have been broadly ostracized by much of the local Muslim community previously. His extremist views even led some Muslim community leaders to warn government officials about specific members of the group [years in advance](#).

Sri Lanka's past provides insight into what may have motivated a small Islamic insurgent group to act in revenge against Tamil or Sinhalese targets. But what explains the attacks on Christian churches and hotels?

Sri Lanka's International Dimensions

Sri Lankan politicians are blaming each other for the security failures just as the connection to broader, global motivations is [proving true](#). IS claimed responsibility three days after the attack and the first video of the group's leader in five years makes reference to the Easter attacks as revenge for IS's demise in Iraq and Syria. This attack proves that despite their dwindling territorial claims, IS maintains a lot of violent, if geographically dispersed, capabilities.

IS seems to have been successful in co-opting a local Sri Lankan group for their own aims, as the attacks don't [seem to truly follow](#) the tense lines of ethno-religious divisions that have characterized the country for decades. However, the targets do fit the mould of other international attacks by IS, including the attacks on churches in Egypt on Palm Sunday 2017.

Sri Lankan authorities have claimed that the country is now [safe and clear](#) of any other similar threats. The authorities' confidence arises from the swift crackdown that led to over 50 suspects being arrested and the two leading figures of the NTJ blowing themselves up in the April 21 attacks. And while information connecting NTJ's finances are still incomplete, authorities have begun to believe that one wealthy group member may have [bankrolled the attacks](#).



[A recent report](#) details the proliferation of extremists in South Asia. The region has had the largest concentration of Islamist extremist groups despite long American wars in Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan. There are fears that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan may lead to an increase in those numbers. [Pakistan](#) has been branded as a source of funding for much of the region's extremists while Saudi Arabia is [rumoured](#) to have tenuous ties to some elements of Sri Lanka's Muslim population as well.

[Pakistan](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) are known to have links to another nearby island country, the Republic of Maldives, which, thanks to a surge in Islamist radicalism, rocketed [to lead the world](#) in the number of jihadists per capita. [Bangladesh](#) is also notable for a rise in violent extremism and links to global funding, especially with the existence of an IS affiliate within its borders. The fragility of Bangladesh's border regions and the presence of Islamic extremists pose many problems for the country's future and that of neighbouring Myanmar.

Making other countries in the region more amenable to Islamic extremism are their considerable Muslim populations, high unemployment and poverty rates, and governments that are sympathetic or reliant on external backing. Hence, jihadist extremism is able to penetrate these countries in South Asia in ways that it cannot in Sri Lanka. Some of the [highest rates of poverty](#) remain in Tamil areas in which a large chunk of the Muslim community resides, adding to frustration and presenting potential avenues for malignant actors. However, relative deprivation is not a clear indicator of any particular outcome. The perpetrators of Islamic extremism in South Asia have typically been from affluent backgrounds, some with a Western university education.

Future Implications

Despite the history of clashes toward and suppression of the Muslim population, it remains to be seen whether the groups involved with the April 21 attacks had objectives tied to deeper local sentiments. It seems likely that international backers exploited local grievances to make a broader point. This should be a wake-up call for policy-makers throughout the world.

To combat the LTTE, the Sri Lankan government co-opted the language of the War on Terror that appeared in the U.S. post-9/11. This led to the near-eradication of the group and thousands of Tamil civilians at the same time. The same rhetoric has been used to justify the anti-Muslim sentiment that is already widespread among nationalists. Indeed, these attacks may serve to intensify the violent rhetoric from Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists who feel vindicated. Of course, the island's Muslims are already [feeling those effects](#).

Around the world, we are witnessing politicians and governments fomenting nationalist rhetoric. With Sri Lanka's presidential elections expected sometime in the latter half of 2019, the political effects of the attacks could reverberate further, especially as political rivalries are projected to remain contentious during the coming campaigns. Political elites have already [used the attacks](#) as an anticipatory platform plank.

Next door, India is seeing the consequences of the attacks [seep into the political discourse](#) as that country prepares to go to the polls. The ruling BJP party has capitalized on the attacks in order to further galvanize the Hindu nationalist base that Prime Minister Narendra Modi heavily relies on.



The risk of terrorism increases exponentially with weak governance and grievances. Sri Lanka's government went through a constitutional crisis in the latter months of 2018, when President Maithripala Sirisena suddenly dismissed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The crisis ended with both men locked in a bitter rivalry while maintaining their roles. Grievances from the civil war also remain fraught as Sirisena is on record as [blaming the lack of security](#) on minimal efforts to seek reconciliation.

The government of Sri Lanka must make tough decisions that balance an effective response to the acts while heeding the ethnic divides that exist. Right after the attacks, the government enacted a measure to ban certain Muslim garb. [To terrorism experts](#), however, such responses – those that target specific communities – have the potential to exacerbate the narratives that terrorist groups attempt to manufacture.

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