

What Hinders Peace on the Pearl?

Analyzing the Aftermath of the 2019 Easter Bombings on Social Divisions in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper examines the consequences of religious violence within Sri Lanka, focusing on the case of the 2019 Easter Bombings perpetrated by an Islamic extremist group. It considers the bombings as a catalyst for increased violence against Muslims in the country and a heightened expression of such violence by Sinhalese Buddhists. These distinctions are crucial as they underscore the persistent historical divisions between ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka, rooted in the colonial era and reinforced during the country's violent Civil War spanning from 1983 to 2008. The objective of this paper is to explore how the Easter bombings exacerbated existing societal divisions by analyzing anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, as manifested through acts of violence (both state-sponsored and individual harm) targeting the Muslim community. The measurement of anti-Muslim sentiment relies on reports by the government and external organizations regarding the treatment of Muslims in Sri Lanka, as well as the culmination of such rhetoric by Buddhist nationalist political leaders in the country. Ultimately, the paper concludes that there has been a discernible increase in anti-Muslim sentiment subsequent to the 2019 Easter bombings. It suggests that the intensified rise of Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, particularly in the aftermath of the attacks, contributes to an uneasy political climate and persistent divisions within the population.

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Introduction

For communities around the world, last week's Easter Sunday commemoration was used as a time to come together in celebration and spend quality time with family and friends. For Sri Lanka, however, Easter Sunday was a reminder of the numerous lives lost three years ago to lethal bombings in churches and hotels around the country. Amidst heavy political turmoil in the country surrounding the current economic crisis, Catholic communities in Sri Lanka are rallying for justice for the victims and their families and ordering the government to more adequately deal with investigations into the conspirators of the deadly violence, who were found to be Islamic extremists (Mallawarachi, 2022).

The relevance of the attacks to the people in Sri Lanka has not yet gone away; the reflections on the event raise interesting questions about the impact of religious terrorism on a population in dealing with the aftermath of such catastrophes. When I visited Sri Lanka in August of 2019—a mere three months following the attacks—I heard comments targeted against the Muslim communities and businesses in my parent's hometown, some made by my own relatives. While I knew very well of the Islamophobia that plagued the U.S, I was compelled as to why acts of a few were used to negatively view entire groups of people in Sri Lanka. Why was religion so divisive, and had it always been that way?

More exclusively, in the case of Sri Lanka, how did the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Bombings work to exacerbate the country's existing societal divisions?

While there is no clear-cut measure of what 'exacerbating divisions' looks like, I pull from various cases of conflict in the politics of Sri Lanka, and examine how they affect the locals there in defining those terms. I will attempt to answer this question with an analysis of two main factors: 1) by evaluating anti-Muslim sentiment following the attacks and 2) by evaluating the

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rise of Buddhist nationalism in the Sri Lankan political sphere. Before this, of course, I shall explain what the existing societal divisions in Sri Lanka are through an examination of the intense history—through a political and religious context—of the ‘pearl of the Indian Ocean’ in order to carefully analyze the aftermath of the terror attacks.

Political Context

Sri Lanka is a country of unique composition. The island, located south of India, is home to an estimated 23 billion people who belong to various ethnic and religious groups. Sinhalese people make up 74.9% of the population, followed by 11.2% of Sri Lankan Tamils, 9.2% of Sri Lankan Moors, 4.2% of Indian Tamils, and others (CIA, n.d.). Ethnic identity in Sri Lanka holds historical and personal significance, and its influence on the politics of the nation can be attributed to the colonial legacy left by the British empire. The British colonized the island, naming it Ceylon, in 1796 after it had been ceded to them by the Dutch. They remained in control of the country until 1948, when their grasp on Ceylon, and many other global territories, weakened following the end of WWII (Peiris, 2022). British colonial rule in Sri Lanka created a relative hierarchy concerning ethnic identity, as Tamil Sri Lankans were given greater access to opportunities abroad in professional jobs and other higher-ranking occupations since they were closer in linguistic abilities to the Tamils in India (Anandakugan, 2021). This contributed to divisions in Tamil and Sinhalese lifestyles, and the favoritism of Tamils created tensions between the two groups well after the end of colonial rule, with a rise in Sinhalese nationalism that translated politically as the passage of discriminatory legislation by the government. Among others, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 made Sinhala the official language of the country, renaming the country 'Sri Lanka' and making Buddhism the main religion of the country, effectively

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reinforcing the idea of Sri Lanka being a nation of Sinhalese people (“Timeline”, n.d.). These actions ultimately culminated in the Sri Lankan Civil War which lasted from 1983 until 2009.

The Civil War is important to address in discussing the societal divisions existing prior to the 2019 bombings because of the polarity and tactics of both sides of the conflict. On one side, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, abbreviated LTTE, fought for sovereign land as a Tamil-led separatist group, and on the other, the majority Sinhalese government through the state military forces; the nation catapulted into a brutal conflict that saw extreme violence spanning across the island. The combination of the colonial legacy in Sri Lanka, as well as their Civil War, ultimately generated Sri Lankans’ stronger attachment to their ethno-religious identity.

Religious Context

While much of the political struggle was mainly devolved from religion, it is extremely important to emphasize the connection between ethnic identity to religious ones. In Sri Lanka, categories like ethnicity and religious beliefs are blurred, as “the Sri Lankan Muslim identity was and is a reactive politico-cultural identity...constructed as a response to late colonial Sri Lankan politics” and the Sinhala and Tamil ethnonationalism during the Civil War (Imtiyaz, 2022).

Because the Muslim community fit into both ethnic groups, they were often forced to choose a side, and the LTTE often made attempts to recruit Muslims into their ranks by emphasizing the government’s mistreatment of the religious minority. The Civil War stressed ethnic divisions, thus making religion more divided in the process, as Buddhists are Sinhalese; Hindus are Tamils; Muslims comprise a separate ethnic category, as aforementioned due to the complicated features of the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils, and in the necessity of creating a new group (The Asia Foundation, 2011). This also means that the numbers of ethnic populations align similarly with the main religions: Theravada Buddhism is the most commonly practiced, with a

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70.2% membership, followed by Hinduism with 12.6%, Islam with 9.7%, and Roman Catholicism with 6.1% as of 2012 (CIA, n.d.). With the establishment of these stronger ethnoreligious groups, religious minorities—mainly Muslims and Christians—were subject to discrimination by the government, regardless of their ethnic background. In terms of anti-Muslim propagation before 2019, a Buddhist nationalist group by the name of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) campaigned against the implementation of Halal-certified foods in 2013 and eventually won by banning Halal labels, except on exports to Islamic countries (Amnesty International, 2020). This illustrates just a fraction of the sentiment held and condoned by the government against Islam and its religious practices, which proved to deteriorate even further on April 21st, 2019—Easter Sunday.

As aforementioned, both hotels and churches across the nation were targeted; the commercial city of Colombo saw the local and foreign-resident-filled luxury hotels of Shangri-La, Cinnamon Grand, the Kingsbury, as well as the St. Anthony's Church which was participating in Easter mass. In Negombo, St. Christian's Church and Zion Church in Batticaloa were also victims of the coordinated fatal bombings. The loss from these six locations amounted to around 290 civilians, with hundreds more injured (Malone, 2019). The terrorists were later identified as members of the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), a domestic jihadist terror group that is now suspected to have ties with the Islamic State, as they claimed responsibility two days following the attacks (Callimachi, 2019).

Argument

While the Sri Lankan government is now dealing with heavier backlash over the untimely handling of national security warnings and the inadequate investigation into the attack, it can not be denied that the 2019 Easter bombings caused more social unrest, and worked to exacerbate

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existing societal divisions in the country. The wounds of a divided island resurfaced because of the attacks and led to deeper cuts by creating a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, fueling Buddhist nationalism, and overall, slowing down possibilities for unity and peace in a post-civil war-torn nation.

In providing for my stance, I hold that the terror attacks in 2019 create increased divisions in Sri Lankan society through religious lines mainly with an increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric mirrored in public and governmental action, as well as an increase in Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism that was—and frankly, continues to be—openly embraced by Sri Lankan political leaders in the country. Counterclaims to this argument could include the fact that religious hatred and Buddhist nationalism were already present and powerful social issues, however, it should be emphasized that I am testing whether or not there has been an increase in these problematic outcomes, as well as the impact of it on greater political and social unity in the country.

Evidence

Anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka has been carried out in numerous ways. To a large extent, government regulations and the actions of citizens serve as the main functions of Islamophobia in Sri Lanka. About a week after the Easter attacks on April 28, 2019, President Sirisena imposed an emergency ban on face coverings, stating that materials covering the full face were a hindrance to public identification and the safety of the nation (Amnesty International, 2020). While the order was dropped in August, a new law was proposed in May of 2019 that would officially ban the wearing of burqas, a clear violation of international law. The implementation of the emergency ban, as well as the proposed law, have led to the stigmatization of women who wear religious head coverings like the burqa or niqab, challenging their right to non-discrimination and freedom of religious practice. In addition to proposals to ban religious

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attire, the government's Sectoral Oversight Committee has also made suggestions to shut down Islamic schools, implying that the communities engaging in Islam carried the potential to become violent extremists, threatening the security of the nation (Amnesty International, 2020).

Other than the implementation of anti-Muslim policies, the actions of citizens also reflect an increase in Islamophobic attitudes through discriminatory acts and speeches. In Negombo, around 1,063 Muslim refugees and asylum seekers left their homes in Sri Lanka due to threats of violence by individuals and groups, forcible eviction, or an overall hostile environment (Amnesty International, 2020). The removal of these refugees from their homes communicates the extent to which their own safety had been compromised following the terrorist attacks.

Another way of assessing Sri Lanka's growing intolerance toward its Muslim population is by looking at its Government Restrictions Index (GRI) score. GRI measures restrictions made by the government on religion on a scale of 0-10, with higher numbers denoting greater religious restrictions taken on by the government. Sri Lanka lies on the "high" scale (range of 4.5-6.5), and according to Pew Research, Sri Lanka experienced the biggest change in comparison to other countries in its GRI score in 2019 with an increase of 1.8 points (Pew Research, 2021). While anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka was a problem before the attacks, I wanted to illustrate just how severely the Easter bombings caused an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment and violence. I collected and compared reports of anti-Muslim attacks from the US State Department's 2018 and 2019 Religious Freedom Report by measuring violence against Muslims based on the number of written mentions it received in the document. This should not be interpreted as the actual number of individually documented incidents, which is altogether much higher (and unspecified in the report). While I focused specifically on anti-Muslim violence in this paper, it seems vital to address that the amount of violence against Christian populations was

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also high in both years, highlighting the existing and increasing divisions between the religious majority and minority. The number of mentioned incidents against Muslims more than doubled after the attacks in 2019.

	Prior to Easter Bombings (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2018)	Following Easter Bombings (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2019)
Violence against Muslims	4	10

Evidently, many of the instances documented are carried out by Buddhist nationalists, making the issue of anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka and the issue of rising Buddhist nationalism go hand-in-hand. These two variables appear to have a positive relationship, as a rise in Buddhist nationalism gives way to increased violence against religious minorities. It is worthwhile to point out that Buddhist identity was and still is deeply viewed as a national characteristic of Sri Lanka as a nation, with monks and government officials working closely together following colonial rule to preserve what they believed were abandoned traditions and cultural values; often, this translated to using Buddhism instrumentally to win electoral power and to justify authoritarian leadership (Weiberg-Salzman, 2014). We see these patterns appear even stronger with the presidential elections that occurred in November of 2019. During the 2019 presidential election, Buddhist nationalism, and speech propagated by monks in power provided for stronger divisions between religious groups in the political sphere.

Following the attacks, President Maitripala Sirisena announced he would not run for reelection, thus opening the door for two candidates: the United National Party's Sajith Premadasa and Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's Gotabaya Rajapaksa to run a heated campaign. During the election period, Muslims and other minorities were kept from the polls through targeted violence; on one occasion, a bus carrying registered voters was attacked, keeping many

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from placing their ballots (Ellis-Peterson, 2019). This was viewed as an attempt by Buddhist nationalists to prevent the votes from going toward the UNP, as many minorities shared a common distaste toward Rajapaksa as he was the former defense secretary during the Civil War responsible for the abuse of military power and crimes against non-combatant Tamil civilians.

Clear-cut divisions along party lines reveal how deeply rooted religion is in Sri Lankan politics, with the majority of votes from ethnoreligious minorities going towards the UNP, and Sinhalese voters supporting SLPP. The results showed Rajapaksa to be leader of the country, and with his win came remarks from political and religious supporters like Galagoda Gnanasara, a member of the Buddhist nationalist party Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). Gnanasara, who instead of being punished for his anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate speech, was released from imprisonment after the attacks, and swiftly advocated for the promotion of Sinhalese culture and erasure of Tamil or Muslim presence on the island, suggesting that Halal practices, religious attire, Islamic banks, courts, and universities have destroyed the “social integrity” of the nation (Schmall, 2019). This unregulated and condoned hate speech from nationalists by the government effectively revived post-Civil War anti-Muslim sentiment with economic boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses and products, organized violence against Muslims, and the spread of old rumors by nationalist groups that Muslims were plotting to sterilize Sinhalese women (Platinum Transparency, 2019). As we examined, there has been a rise in anti-Muslim following the 2019 attacks, as well as significant use of Buddhist nationalist rhetoric in Sri Lanka. But what does this mean for overall efforts of social unity, and interreligious harmony?

The 2019 OHCHR Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief in Sri Lanka reported that, overall, ethnic and religious minorities believe their communities are marginalized or are at risk of being ‘colonized’ by the majority. At the same time, majority groups in Sri Lanka argue “that

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the ‘invasion’ of new religious communities in certain areas is not welcomed as they do not fit, or use the pretext that the new religious groups have undermined religious harmony in certain areas or hurt religious feelings of the majority people” (Shaheed, 2019). This clear antagonism of the majority and minority on the respective sides suggests that people in Sri Lanka still identify strongly with their ethnoreligious groups and that they both equally feel threatened by the other's presence. Even in terms of good governance, the political systems in Sri Lanka do not seem representative and as open to minority concerns as they are to the majority, leading to inefficiency and overall inability to address pressing matters in the nation, and as we see now, serious problems of corruption and mismanagement of affairs.

Conclusion

In answering the question of how the suicide bombings on Easter Sunday in 2019 helped to exacerbate existing societal divisions, mainly those religious tensions already present in Sri Lanka, I’ve found that there has been an increase in hate crimes and speech against the Muslim minority, as well as the implementation of anti-Muslim policies following the attacks. In addition, stronger opposition to Muslims through speech propagated by Buddhist nationalists and their supporters was present following the attacks. Implications of this case study reveal the potential of religious extremism through terror attacks to fuel continued anti-Muslim policies in a country post-attack. The fueling of anti-Muslim sentiment may cause animosity for the government, country, and larger ethnoreligious groups by minorities, leading to a potential for larger conflicts to take place—erasing Sri Lanka’s recovery from Civil War thus far. As worded by Ahmad Shaheed, “Tensions can become a tinderbox that could flare up with even the slightest quarrel or incident” (Shaheed, 2019). Buddhist nationalism and its harmful rhetoric have and

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continue to shut out the diverse beliefs, opinions, and rights of minority groups in Sri Lanka, who have contributed to the making of the country as much as the majority.

Limitations to these findings vary, as exact numbers of instances of religious hatred in Sri Lanka are not heavily documented. These results also raise the question of whether other variables are involved in the increased violence against Muslim and minority religions, as motives could be unrelated to the 2019 attacks. Without knowing the true motivations of perpetrators of hate crimes, as well as the actions of government officials, we can not know for sure whether or not these events are correlated rather than caused by the aftermath of the 2019 Easter bombings. However, it is important to recognize that political opinions and sentiments are constantly formed by the events that take place in a particular period; in a broader sense, populations and their governments are shaped by their past and present. Much more work needs to be done in evaluating the immediate effects of the bombings on religious tensions in Sri Lanka, and how it has contributed to deeper societal divisions within the nation. Will we see a unified and safer Sri Lanka anytime soon?

Things are not so clear, but change is occurring. Amidst Sri Lanka's current economic crisis, youth among different ethnoreligious groups are coming together in opposition of the incompetent government, protesting to remove the current president Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the rest of his family from holding positions of power any longer. Perhaps this new generation is capable of mending the wounds left by colonialism, civil war, and religious conflict to become a nation united under one principle: humanity.

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