
A Decade on from the last Growl of the Tiger: Religious Terrorism and Sri Lanka's new challenges

Introduction

On the late evening of 20 February 2009, two diminutive aircrafts swiftly approached Sri Lanka's capital with the intention of launching an attack against the military's defense base in Colombo. The Zlin Z-143 airplanes were flown by ferocious Air Tigers; the air-wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)¹, fueled with determination to execute yet another successful attack against the Sri Lankan government. As power supplies were cut, thereby plunging Colombo into darkness, people went into hiding while aimless shots were fired into the night. The *Kamikaze*-style suicide attack may not have caused as much detriment as anticipated – chiefly due to the detection and subsequent destruction of the two aircrafts by the Sri Lanka Air Force² – yet it functioned as a sour reminder to the world of the capabilities of what the FBI once termed “among the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world”³. The February 2009 suicide raid would ultimately prove to be the last Growl of the Tiger, whereupon in May 2009 the LTTE was militarily decimated by the Sri Lankan armed forces, thus marking the termination of the 25-year ethnic civil war with the declaration of victory on behalf of the Sinhalese government.

Meantime, it seemed like the West was blissfully ignorant to the existence of ‘*The Pearl of the Indian Ocean*’ and the extent to which it had been traumatized as a result of the armed conflict. This decade-old amnesia was, however, shattered to pieces in the wake of Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday bombings in April 2019, which claimed the lives of over 250 individuals, wounding another 500.⁴ Eight high intensity blasts, chiefly targeting Christian churches and prestigious hotels, were carried out by a group of nine affluent, educated Sri Lankan Muslim youth.⁵ Sri Lanka's confidence in the State's primary duty, that of providing security to its citizens, had once again been undermined by coordinated suicide attacks carried out by its own citizens. Subsequently, the question of whether Sri Lanka was capable of outmaneuvering terrorism fueled by religious rather than separatist motives appeared to guide the debate.

Aside from the alarming possibility of Sri Lanka becoming a prospective hotbed for religious extremism, a fundamental concern that should not be overlooked is the extensive failure of intelligence sharing on behalf of the government and consequent security lapse prior to the Easter Sunday attacks. The mounting evidence pointing to that the attacks could have been prevented with

¹ In this research paper the terms ‘Tigers’, ‘Tamil Tigers’, ‘Liberation Tamils of Tamil Eelam’ and ‘LTTE’ are employed synonymously.

² Hodge, Amanda. “Kamikaze raid shows the Tamil Tigers have not been tamed.” *The Australian*, February 23, 2009. Accessed August 19, 2019.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090508100212/http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25091354-25837,00.html>

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation. “Taming the Tamil Tigers from here in the U.S.” October 1, 2008. Assessed August 23, 2019. https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/stories/2008/january/tamil_tigers011008

⁴ Goldman, Russell. “Pointing a Finger at a Terrorist Group in the Aftermath of the Sri Lanka Blasts.” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2019. Assessed August 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/22/world/asia/sri-lanka-bombing-explosion.html>

⁵ Amarasingam, Amarnath. “Terrorism on the Teardrop Island. Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka.” *CTCSENTINEL* 12, no. 5 (2019): 1-10.

improved cooperation between local and foreign intelligence agencies speaks of worrisome signs of political instability rooted in a distrustful and dysfunctional government. The question of how Sri Lanka's officials intend to combat this novel form of terrorism against a background of distrust between its key politicians, President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, ought to emerge and thereupon be addressed.

This paper presents an examination of Sri Lanka's history of unrest, the current geopolitical crises and its simultaneous fight against brewing religious terrorism, while further highlighting the necessity for Sri Lankan officials to shift focus towards enhanced intelligence cooperation, future collaboration with other South Asian nations and focus on nation-building through improved reconciliation efforts. Noting the nation's long history of a relentless civil war and the related struggle with combatting terrorism, the paper begins by providing a brief outline of the governments ethnocentric policies that eventually birthed Tamil separatism, followed by an overview of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's unparalleled whole-of-nation grand strategy that led to the eventual defeat of the LTTE. Thereafter, the paper provides a detailed overview of the Easter Sunday attacks, while concurrently analysing the nation's history of violence against its religious minorities. The following section explores Sri Lanka's on-going political turmoil that led to the failure of intelligence cooperation. The argument that this paper will put forth is that in order to effectively combat further manifestations of ethno-religious violence, the Sri Lankan government must begin by setting its post-war political power-plays aside, after which it should redirect its efforts towards meaningful reconciliation, nation-building and cooperation with other South Asian nations currently combatting Islamic violence.

A History of Unrest

For many, the Easter Sunday attacks immediately recalled traces of Sri Lanka's ethnic civil war; indeed, the art of suicide bombing had been perfected by the erstwhile LTTE.⁶ While it would be a misconception to suggest that the religiously motivated attacks are a continuation of the war, it is nevertheless important to understand the dynamics of ethno-nationalism that led up to a quarter-century of insurgency, war crimes, and terrorism that afflicted the country between 1983 and 2009. This entails providing a brief historical account of Sri Lanka's struggle with ethnic tensions, the birth of Tamil separatism, and the unconstitutional counterterrorist strategies deployed under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, resulting in the eventual collapse of the LTTE. Such an overview enables the analysis of how the concomitant militarism, culture of impunity particularly amongst the government's military forces, and political machinations may have contributed to escalating tensions between the nation's ethnic and religious communities. Furthermore, it allows to better understand the post-war power-dynamics which has resulted in the nation's current political turmoil.

Sri Lankan society is an ethno-religious mosaic⁷, and clear religious divisions can be found within the ethnic groups.⁸ Of the ethnic and religious groups, Tamil Hindus have predominated the Northern Province and have further maintained a strong presence in the Eastern Province, which helps to explain the LTTE's quest for a separate independent state in these regions. Muslims are also found in

⁶ The FBI states that "[a]s terrorist groups go, it [LTTE] has quite a résumé: perfected the use of suicide bombers; invented the suicide belt; pioneer the use of women in suicide attacks". See Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Taming the Tamil Tigers from here in the U.S.", *supra* note 3.

⁷ Based on 2012 statistics, the Sri Lankan population is as follows: Sinhalese: 74.9 %; Sri Lankan Tamils: 11.1%; Moors (followers of Islam): 9.3 %; Indian Tamils: 4.1%; Malays (followers of Islam): 0.22%; Burghers: 0.19%.

⁸ According to the 2012 census, Buddhists make up 70.1% of the population; Hindus account for 12.6%; Muslims – who constitute the only ethnic group who have a single term to denote ethnicity and religion – along with Malays account for 9.7%; Christians account for 7.6%.

sizeable numbers in the Eastern Province, whereas Christians are found in small numbers throughout the country. Sinhalese Buddhists, on the other hand, predominate the remaining regions of the nation. Despite the religious diversity present in the nation, Sri Lanka's history of the brutal violence stemmed from other elements – in fact, the main impetus for the civil war was linguistic nationalism, not religious differences.⁹

Although tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils were heightened prior to independence from the British in 1948, the triggering point of systemic discrimination against the minority Tamil community flourished in the wake of the 1956 Ceylonese parliamentary election.¹⁰ Under the newly formed United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a series of policies were overseen which revealed the government's agenda of state-sponsored marginalization of the Tamils, including the Sinhala Only Act which replaced English as the official language with Sinhala. What followed was the institutionalization of policies promoting Sinhalese Buddhist superordination and Tamil subordination¹¹, such as the discriminatory and ethnocentric 1972 Constitution which essentially gave foremost status to Buddhism, thereby neglecting previous secular practices. The nature of ethnic outbidding guiding Sri Lankan politics in the early 1970's made the quest for an independent Tamil state virtually impossible, exemplified by the birth of numerous Tamil insurgent groups. The most successful of these was the Tamil New Tigers, later renamed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran, whose determination to fight for the Tamil cause would plunge the nation into war. Neil DeVotta asserts that while the LTTE undeniably evolved into a monstrous outfit in the course of almost three decades, it was nevertheless the "*thickets of ethnocentric policies that post-independence Sri Lankan governments instituted [that] birthed and legitimated the Tamil quest for separatism*".¹²

The perseverance of the Tamil Tigers' quest for the proposed independent state of Tamil Eelam through means of self-determination cannot be underestimated; throughout a period of almost three decades, the internationally proscribed terrorist organization along with its 30,000 fighters developed a meticulous umbrella organization consisting of a political and military wing through which it coordinated and executed several successful attacks in the national and international sphere. The capacity of the LTTE in instilling fear into the minds of the people was an unprecedented phenomenon

⁹ For a duration of 450 years, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonized the island, where the latter resorted to divide and rule policies that evidently favored Tamils. For instance, schools set up by missionaries in the Northern Province provided Tamils with an excellent English-style education, thereby leading them to become disproportionately overrepresented in the public sector. Several authors argue that it was essentially colonialism that accentuated both groups' ethnic distinction. See generally DeVotta, Neil. "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka." *Asian Survey* 25 no. 6 (2009): 1021-1051; Tambiah, Stanley. *Buddhism Betrayal? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

¹⁰ Kingsbury, Damien. "Sri Lanka has a history of conflict, but the recent attacks appear different." *The Conversation*. April 22, 2019. Assessed August 19, 2019. <http://theconversation.com/sri-lanka-has-a-history-of-conflict-but-the-recent-attacks-appear-different-115815>

¹¹ DeVotta, Neil. "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka." *Supra* note 8, at 1026.

¹² *Ibid.*, at 1022.

in the international arena¹³, alleged of recruiting child soldiers and destroying anyone perceived as a potential opponent.¹⁴

In an era where the “*War on Terrorism*” narrative remained largely unheard of, the Sri Lankan government was prompted to relentlessly pursue a pacific settlement with the Tigers through means of negotiation. Numerous attempts at resolving the ethnic conflict took place mainly with the assistance and initiatives of the Norwegian authorities, whereby optimistic signs of reaching a peaceful settlement appeared to loom in the close distance during the early moments of the new millennium. President Chandrika Kumaratunga even sought to create a new constitution that accommodated Tamil’s complaints by means of a devolved federal set-up, although her efforts were thwarted by the UNP opposition.¹⁵

Yet, in mid-2006 sensing victory at its grasp, the organization deliberately ended the ceasefire by closing the gates on the Mavil Aru dam in the Eastern Province, thereby initiating Eelam War IV. However, any flicker of hope of an independent *eelam* that once may have loomed in the distance was crushed in November 2005 in the wake of the newly elected President Mahinda Rajapaksa whose election manifesto vowed to maintain the unitary state structure. In contrast to the pacific solutions embraced by his predecessors, Rajapaksa’s regime differed by giving the military the *carte blanche* to annihilate the LTTE – irrespective of the economic, human and diplomatic costs.

The LTTE’s Unraveling

Whereas successive governments had attempted to instill peace by means of negotiation, Rajapaksa’s grand strategy was proclaimed as “*war for peace*” – lasting peace was obtainable but only with the aid of brutal military tactics. In addition to the military transformation, the government of Sri Lanka’s strategy encompassed diplomatic, economic, and internal aspects, which had previously assured the Tigers their strength.¹⁶ Diplomatically, the government succeeded in isolating the LTTE from the international community by convincing several Western governments to proscribe the group as a terrorist organization, thereby installing grave repercussions on the group’s financing capacities. Until then, the Tamil diaspora had played a key part in the organization’s fundraising due to voluntary and involuntary contributions made to LTTE controlled charity organizations. Furthermore, the Tamil Tigers had procured most of their arms and military hardware from foreign sources, including private gun runners and other global terrorist organizations.¹⁷

¹³ The LTTE assassinated two world leaders, Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, and Ranasinghe Premadasa, President of Sri Lanka in respectively. They remain the only terrorist organization to have succeeded. See Elliott, J. & Bock, J.G. “Testing the Coreligionist Hypothesis in Sri Lanka”. In Brandon D. Lundy, Akanmu G. Adebayo & Sherill Hayes (Eds.) *Atone: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation*. Lexington: Lexington Books, 2018: 249-264.

¹⁴ Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) reported that the LTTE engaged in “extortion, targeted killings and continued child recruitment”. See UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)*, 16 September 2015, A/HRC/30/CRP.2, para. 56.

¹⁵ For a general understanding of what President Kumaratunga’s proposal of greater regional autonomy, see Obsert, Robert. *Government and Politics in South Asia, Student Economy Edition*. London: Routledge, 2015.

¹⁶ Layton, Peter. “How Sri Lanka Won the War.” *The Diplomat*. April 9, 2015. Assessed August 21, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/how-sri-lanka-won-the-war/>

¹⁷ Byman, Daniel, Chalk, Peter & Hoffman, Bruce. “Appendix B: The LTTE’s Military-Related Procurement.” *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001: 117-122.

Amid the realization that the LTTE was being pushed into complete international isolation, the Rajapaksa's regime turned its gaze towards internal affairs. Conscious of the war weariness of its people, the regime utilized this to its own strategic advantage by allowing development activities to continue. Fundraising from both local and international organization became easier, and more importantly, it restored the hope for peace into the minds of the people. These increased budgets and additional support from the population allowed for the significant expansion of the Sri Lankan Army, growing from some 120,000 personnel in 2005 to more than 200,000 in 2009.¹⁸

The Sri Lankan Army Northern offensive began in 2008, whereby government's armed forces overwhelmed the Tamil Tigers with well-trained units, colossal firepower, and numerous simultaneous assaults.¹⁹ Due to the intensification of hostilities, all United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental humanitarian organizations were ordered to withdraw the LTTE-held territories, as local officials could no longer guarantee the safety of the personnel.²⁰ By removing any international observers and subsequent monitoring mechanisms from the territories, the Vanni region was isolated from the rest of the world therefore weakening the legal protection accorded to civilians caught up in the conflict. After months of heavy casualties, the LTTE admitted defeat on 17th of May 2009 and Vellupillai Prabhakaran's bullet-ridden body was exhibited to the media in the following days. The shift in the government's counterinsurgency strategy had proved useful, although as Jon Lee Anderson explains:

*"In military circles around the world, the "Sri Lanka option" for counter-insurgency was discussed with admiration. Its basic tenets were: deny access to the media, the United Nations, and human-rights groups; isolate your opponents, and kill them as quickly as possible; and segregate and terrify the survivors- or, ideally, leave no witnesses at all".*²¹

Some have criticized the government's victory as being solely possible due to the indiscriminate counterinsurgency policy and complete disregard of civilian casualties during the final phases of the conflict. Indeed, the UN has estimated that the Army's intentional shelling of government-designated "No Fire Zones" (NFZs) alone was primarily accountable for killing a staggering 70,000 Tamil civilians, while some activists say the figure is closer to 140,000.²² Nevertheless, the Rajapaksa government strictly opposed international investigations into the alleged human rights violations perpetrated during the final phases of its counterinsurgency strategy. In short, anyone who criticized the government or military over war-related matters was branded as *"minions of neocolonial powers set on discrediting Sri Lanka, part of a Western and U.N. conspiracy to brand the island a 'failed island', and LTTE stooges"*.²³ The reluctance to face international prosecution prompted the Sri Lankan government to realign its foreign policy by becoming a closer ally with non-Western nations such as China, Pakistan and Iran, with the former capable of vetoing any Sri Lanka-related issue to be discussed at the United Nations Security Council.

¹⁸ Layton, Peter. "How Sri Lanka Won the War." *Supra* note 16.

¹⁹ Hashim, A. *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012: 131. <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/841050> (assessed August 25, 2019).

²⁰ OHCHR Report, *supra* note 14, at para 81.

²¹ Anderson, Jon Lee. "Death of the Tiger." *The New Yorker*. January 9, 2011, assessed August 15, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/17/death-of-the-tiger>

²² Arulthas, Mario. "The Sri Lanka attacks: New front, old wounds." *Al Jazeera*, April 22, 2019. Assessed August 22, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/sri-lanka-attacks-front-wounds-190422110652434.html>

²³ DeVotta, Neil. "The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Lost Quest for Separatism in Sri Lanka." *Supra* note 8, p. 1045

For many Sri Lankans, the end of the violent and exhausting civil war was celebrated as it meant that peace could once again prevail. In fact, the nation experienced a notable growth in its post-war economy and strong rebounding of its tourist industry.²⁴ Yet, this decade-long spell of peace to which the people of Sri Lanka had become accustomed to, was shattered to pieces on 21 April 2019.

The Easter Attacks and rise of religious intolerance

On 21 April, nine suicide bombers carried out eight high intensity blasts in various parts of Sri Lanka, making it one of the deadliest terrorist attacks the world had witnessed in years. The first six near-simultaneous blasts took place at St Anthony's Church in Colombo, Saint Sebastian's Church in the western coastal town of Negombo, another church in the eastern town of Batticaloa, and in three prestigious hotels located in the capital: the Shangri-La, Cinnamon Grand and Kingsbury. Another explosion took place outside of the Colombo Zoo, with the last blast occurring in the suburb of Orugodawatta. Amidst chaos and confusion, the Sri Lankan government issued a statement claiming that responsibility of the attacks could be attributed to the National Thowheeth Jamath (NTJ); an obscure outfit previously known for its involvement in the destruction of Buddhist statues. On 24 April, the State Minister of Defense, Ruwan Wijewardena stated that on-going investigations revealed that only a more radical splinter fragment of the NTJ was responsible for the attack. After two days following the attacks, the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility by further releasing a video of what it claimed were the suicide bombers involved in the attacks. Given that some members of NTJ are believed to have cultivated links with IS and joined the group in its self-proclaimed Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the finger of suspicion was pointed indeed in this direction, yet it remains unclear how much of a role IS actually played, especially since it has earlier claimed responsibility for attacks that simply drew inspiration from it and which it had not played a direct role in organizational logistics and provision of terrorist infrastructure.

Confusion over what appeared to be religious extremism in its purest form struck the emerald nation. Despite the long history of terrorist attacks perpetuated by the LTTE, Sri Lanka's encounter with what was perceived as "*Islamic fundamentalism*" was an unprecedented phenomenon. However, a closer inspection at the transition period between the end of the civil war and the Easter attacks reveals a trend of aggravated anti-minority sentiments and violence, which in turn may partly explain the potential rise of religiously motivated terrorism.

Regardless of the relatively peaceful decade since 2009, Sri Lanka has not remained immune to intercommunal violence. As Ganeshan Wignaraja contends:

"[a] huge challenge remains in developing a modern Sri Lankan identity where each community – Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Tamil – can practice their religion within a unitary state".²⁵

Traditionally, the nation's history of extremist violence has mostly been contained to Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism, who in their plight for a "*Sinhalisation*" of the nation have taken the path of terrorizing the other minority religions. Amarnath Amarasingam, a Senior Research Fellow at the

²⁴ Gabriel, Guy. "Winning a War in the Era of Unwinnable Wars: The case of Sri Lanka." *World Peace Foundation*. May 13, 2013. Assessed August 25, 2019. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2013/05/13/winning-a-war-in-sri-lanka/>

²⁵ Wignaraja, Ganeshan. "Five key policy lessons from the terror attacks in Sri Lanka." *ODI*, May 10, 2019. Assessed August 20, 2019. <https://www.odi.org/blogs/10760-five-key-policy-lessons-terror-attacks-sri-lanka>

Institute for Strategic Dialogue, ascribes the phenomenon of Sinhalese nationalism to a majority-within-the minority complex – whilst Sinhala Buddhism may represent the majority of the Sri Lankan population, Buddhism nevertheless remains a largely underrepresented religion in the South Asian region.²⁶

In the course of recent years, the nation's most active Buddhist extremist group has been Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist power force or BBS), which entered politics in 2002 with a Buddhist-nationalist ideology and agenda.²⁷ The BBS has been particularly hostile towards Sri Lankan Muslims whereby extremist violence perpetrated against the minority community has especially witnessed a spectacular upsurge. Some notable manifestations include the anti-Muslim riots in 2014 and the recent clashes in Kandy that caused the Sri Lankan government declaring a country-wide state of emergency to overturn communal violence directed at Muslims. It is interesting to note that the nation's Christian community span ethnic lines; there are both Sinhalese Catholic and Tamil Catholics, who were mostly spared from violence emanating from the conflict due to lack of suspicion directed towards their religious community.²⁸ Traditionally Christian and Muslim communities have peacefully co-existed, naturally raising the question of why Christian churches and prestigious hotels in various parts of Colombo and Negombo were targeted during the Easter Sunday attacks.

As analysed in [EFSAS Commentary of 26-04-2019](#), much speculation vis-à-vis the underlying motivations behind the deadly attacks persists within the academic debate. Pointing to the high level of sophistication involved in the attacks, the popular narrative points to external involvement; namely suggesting that responsibility should be attributed not only to the IS, but also regional actors such as Al Qaeda, Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammed or Bangladesh's Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), highlighting the current conflict dynamics in the region. India has also repeatedly cautioned Sri Lanka that it could develop into an operational zone for the LeT and like-minded Jihadi groups. According to *Ceylon Today*, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has used LeT and its cover organization the Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq as proxies to radicalize Sri Lankan Muslims. Madhura Seneviratne of Australia's government owned *Special Broadcasting Service* revealed Pakistan's motives, *"Using Sri Lanka as a staging post, the ISI's primary and apparent objective is to encircle India from all sides. It wanted to use the island nation to access south India, both in terms of finding terror networks as well as for recruitment of cadres"*.

Despite the lack of clear evidence which were the terrorist groups that provided the essential resources for the orchestration of the Easter attacks, the regional penetration of the IS should not be neglected and must be put on the forefront of local and international intelligence services since the IS' followers and ideology remain very much active. At a time where the IS has witnessed heavy losses and has been driven out of Iraq and Syria as a result of a military intervention by the United States (US)-led international coalition, it has contended with launching attacks using home-grown terrorists in order to promote its anti-West/ anti-Christian narrative.²⁹ This has led some to speculate whether Sri Lanka's "targeting" was but *"accidental or opportunistic from the point of view of ISIS, as parts of*

²⁶ The only two majority-Buddhist nations in South Asia are Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Additionally, small Buddhist minorities are found in Nepal, India (particularly in Ladakh and Sikkim) and Bangladesh.

²⁷ Johansson, Andreas. "Violent Buddhist extremists are targeting Muslims in Sri Lanka." *The Conversation*. April 29, 2018. Assessed August 25, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/violent-buddhist-extremists-are-targeting-muslims-in-sri-lanka-92951>

²⁸ Chotiner, Isaac. "A Scholar of Extremism on how Religious Conflict shapes Sri Lanka." *The New Yorker*. April 22, 2019. Assessed August 21, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/g-and-a/a-scholar-of-extremism-on-how-religious-conflict-and-terrorism-shapes-sri-lanka>

²⁹ Arora, Vishal. "Why Did the Islamic State Target Sri Lanka?" *The Diplomat*. May 8, 2019. Assessed August 24, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/why-did-the-islamic-state-target-sri-lanka/>

the island nation had become a fertile ground for indoctrination".³⁰ This argument undermines the role of previously discussed domestic sectarian cleavages in the attacks, whereby the devastation was merely intended for the international audience while having the potential to exacerbate widespread communal violence.³¹ If South Asia is indeed becoming a prospective hotbed for Islamic extremism, it is fundamental to review the failure of intelligence cooperation between Sri Lankan officials that eventually allowed the attacks to take place.

Intelligence failure speaks of political instability

The failure of intelligence cooperation between different agencies that could have potentially averted the Easter Sunday Attacks are a notable manifestation of the on-going political turmoil. Indeed, two weeks prior to the attacks, intelligence officials from India and the US issued warnings to Sri Lankan authorities concerning potential plots against churches and tourist sites.³² A week later, a similar warning containing the list of names and addresses of potential suspects was handed over to the inspector general of police by the Sri Lankan Defense Ministry.³³ An additional memorandum released by the deputy inspector general of police to various government directors, including the heads of the Ministerial Security Division, Judicial Security Division, and Diplomatic Security Division, equally contained warnings about the threat and a list of suspects.³⁴ Furthermore, warnings about the NTJ had previously been issued from within the Muslim community, whereby the vice president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka allegedly warned the military intelligence about the radicalized group as early as in 2016.³⁵ Despite the multitude of warning signs, no concrete action was taken on behalf of the Sri Lankan government, thereby facilitating the course of the attacks. Indeed, these unnecessary and costly failures in the realm of national security reveal the extent of the political turmoil in which the nation's government finds itself.

The climax of the tense political drama that has engulfed the nation dates back to 26 October 2018, when the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) stated that they would withdraw from the coalition government formed together with the country's other major party, the UNP.³⁶ A few hours later, President Maithripala Sirisena used his executive powers to dismiss incumbent Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and instead appointed the very man who had overseen the government's victory against the LTTE; his former nemesis, strongman Mahinda Rajapaksa, whom Sirisena had previously defeated in the 2015 presidential election with the support of the UNP. Declaring the appointment as illegal, the UNP deeply condemned the move and Wickremesinghe refused to cede

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Hettige, Siri. "Ethno-nationalism, religion and political populism – Sri Lanka's political narrative and its implications." *Sri Lanka Brief*, May 13, 2019. Assessed August 20, 2019.

<https://srilankabrief.org/2019/05/ethno-nationalism-religion-and-political-populism-sri-lankas-political-narrative-and-its-implications-siri-hettige/>

³² Khalil, Lydia. "Sri Lanka's Perfect Storm of Failure". *Foreign Policy*. April 23, 2019. Assessed August 22, 2019.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/23/sri-lankas-perfect-storm-of-failure-bombings-government-mistakes-terrorism/>

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Mayberry, Kate. "Suspicion stalks Sri Lanka's Muslim community after bombings." *Al Jazeera*. April 26, 2019. Assessed August 19, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/suspicion-stalks-sri-lanka-muslim-community-bombings-190426053208891.html>

³⁶ Moramudali, Umesh. "The Deep Roots of Sri Lanka's Political Crises." *The Diplomat*. December 11, 2018. Assessed August 22, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/the-deep-roots-of-sri-lankas-political-crisis/>

power.³⁷ Amidst the political chaos that followed, Sirisena succeeded in surprising the nation again by issuing a gazette dissolving the Parliament on 9 November; an act heavily criticized by the national and international community which perceived it as unconstitutional. After the Supreme Court suspended the dissolution, several no-confidence votes against Rajapaksa were issued by the majority of the Parliament, ultimately resulting in his resignation as the Prime Minister.

Naturally, what has followed is a deepening rupture between the President and Prime Minister. In an environment where information is increasingly becoming a crucial political tool, and where Sirisena has amassed the defense and policies ministries under his personal control in his attempt to exclude the Prime Minister from the national security council, the reluctance of lower-level officials to act unilaterally is almost anticipated. Yet, the utter failure to foresee the attacks appears rather perplexing; after all, the frequent terrorist attacks deployed by the Tamil Tigers required a high level of intelligence. This may be a possible indicator that Sri Lankan officials had remain caught up in their objective of fighting the previous civil war. As Sameer Patil, the director of Gateway House's Centre for International Security, said in an interview with *Bloomberg*:

"[t]he Sri Lankan security agencies still go on their long experience with the bloody insurgency... Their mindset is still attuned to any future terrorist attack coming from Tamil Tiger extremists".

What the Sri Lankan government must wrap its head around is the necessity of re-thinking its strategy in the fight against religious motivated terrorism, orchestrated with the aid of international terrorist organizations such as the IS. Military tactics and the use of brutal force that once outmaneuvered the LTTE will not serve as sufficient responses when endeavoring to fight highly advanced terrorist networks, which do not embody the visible presence as the LTTE. Improving intelligence cooperation at transnational and multilateral levels, developing all levels of governance and aiming for political stability are all crucial components in order to prevent another Easter Attack from taking place. An additional solution which the Sri Lankan government could potentially pursue is enhancing collaboration with other nations combatting Islamic extremism in the South Asian region.

Prior to the Sri Lankan terror attacks, the South Asian region had already been on high alert due to prevalent terrorist activities. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2018 (GTI), released in November 2018, South Asia ranked second in regions most affected by terrorism-related attacks and death in 2017. The report also notes that three countries in the region – Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India – are amongst the top ten countries most impacted by terrorism on the global scale. But these nations are not alone – less than ten days after the Easter Sunday attacks, the IS claimed responsibility for another bombing that took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh. While Bangladeshi authorities have remained reluctant to validate the claims of the IS, instead attributing responsibility to its local terrorist outfits JMB, the influence of the IS in the South Asian region is no longer easily dismissible.

With the threat of the IS disseminating its ideology in unstable regions, the possibility of growing radicalization and attendant terrorist attacks should prompt the Sri Lankan government to collaborate with other South Asian governments in order to improve current counter-terrorism measures. Facilitated cooperation and intelligence sharing amongst the nations could prevent future radicalization and further proliferation of home-grown terrorists inspired by religious ideologies.

³⁷ Meixler, Eli. "Sri Lankan Sri Lanka is Engulfed in a "Constitutional Crisis." *Time*, October 29, 2018. Assessed August 25, 2019. <https://time.com/5437457/sri-lanka-mahinda-rajapaksa-president-crisis/>

Investing in reconciliation and nation-building efforts

Although the aforementioned aspect is important in order to avoid potential terrorist attacks, the Sri Lankan government must not turn a blind eye to its internal affairs. In a post-conflict environment, reconciliation is an essential component in order to re-construct a nation that has been torn by violence. In the case of Sri Lanka, these efforts have remained extensively and visibly limited.

A report published by the International Crisis Group in July 2011, entitled *“Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Harder than Ever”*, highlights the manner in which the Sinhalese nationalist post-war policies under former President Rajapaksa’s rule undermine the prospects for reconciliation between the ethnic communities. As the report argues: *“Triumphalist in its successful victory against the Tamil Tigers, the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa was reluctant to acknowledge and address the Tamil minority’s legitimate grievances against the state”*.³⁸ While he had described his post-war visions as *“one nation, one people”*, further calling for *“economic development and prosperity”* as a means of reconciliation, his government increasingly excluded Tamils from the processes of decision-making in matters of political and economic affairs. When the UN created an *“accountability panel”* for the purposes of examining possible human rights violations and war crimes committed during the final phases of the civil war, government-sponsored rioters mobbed its headquarters in Colombo, eventually leading it to close.³⁹ Since the end of the civil war in 2009, the UN and other States have acknowledged that Sri Lanka’s violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

According to the report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL), limited progress has been made to provide justice and accountability for those who desire it. The report lists various violations and abuses of human rights that took place during the last seven years of the conflict, including unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, recruitment and use of children in hostilities, sexual and gender-based violence, and denial of humanitarian assistance.⁴⁰ The failure to hold perpetrators of the aforementioned offences accountable for alleged violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law has not only eroded the rule of law, but further undermined the faith that people have entrusted in their government.

Although hope for a transnational justice agenda re-emerged in the wake of the newly elected President Sirisena in 2015, his promises of reform and acceleration of reconciliation processes have not materialized. Despite the pledge made by the Sri Lankan government to provide justice for wartimes abuses and take additional measures to ensure the respect for human rights as encouraged in UNHRC resolution 30/1 adopted in 2015, critiques have argued that the highly politicized nature of reconciliation in Sri Lanka hampers the probability of future reparations and prosecutions. Yet, the repercussions of neglecting the grievances of the people may aggravate existing tensions between the ethnic and religious communities, thus contributing to further hatred and violence.

³⁸ International Crises Group. *“Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Harder than Ever.”* July 18, 2011. Assessed August 22, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/reconciliation-sri-lanka-harder-ever>

³⁹ Anderson, Jon Lee. *“Death of the Tiger.”* *supra* note 21.

⁴⁰ See generally UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL)*, *supra* note 14.

Conclusion

The potential shift of ethno-nationalistic to religious extremism is a worrying phenomenon, revealing possible failures vis-à-vis earlier hopes for Sri Lanka's transition to a democratic set-up. As the future of home-grown terrorists remains uncertain, it is fundamental for Sri Lankan officials to enhance collaboration with other South Asian nations currently fighting Islamic extremism, while further improving efforts poured into post-war reconciliation processes. These could include the possibility of mediation between the ethnic and religious minorities, while furthermore tackling sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues which may potentially facilitate religious indoctrination and thereby exacerbate religious fundamentalism. Especially in an environment prone to anti-minority religious violence, it is important not to partake in further communal division. However, these improvements will not be attained against a background of political instability and distrust which the nation currently faces. It is therefore crucial for the Sri Lankan government to begin by overcoming on-going power-struggles, and instead redirect its energy and efforts towards those who remain the biggest victim of terrorism – the people of Sri Lanka.

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