

Lessons from the Sri Lankan Easter Sunday Tragedy

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Summary

The Easter Sunday tragedy in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 brought with it important domestic and international lessons. There is also a China focus on developments in Sri Lanka, primarily because of Beijing's geopolitical interest in the Indian Ocean. Countries in South Asia are also keeping a close watch as regional neighbours because of the resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and, more importantly, a stronger and more united Sri Lanka bodes well for regional stability in the South Asian region.

Introduction

For the past decade after the civil war in Sri Lanka, the domestic situation has been so stable that the government believed the country was immune to terrorism. Hence, it was a rude awakening when the country was blitzed by multiple suicide attacks on Easter Sunday on 21 April 2019, resulting in fatalities.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have reportedly claimed responsibility for the attacks, apparently utilising radical-extremist groups, namely the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) and Jamathe Millathu Ibraheem (JMI) as their local proxies inside Sri Lanka.

One month on since Sri Lanka was terrorised, this tragedy has increasingly become an intermestic – a dynamic interplay of international and domestic – concern. There are not just domestic, but also international lessons that can be drawn and learnt from the Easter Sunday tragedy.

Glocalised Terrorism an Existential Threat

Gone are the days when ISIS was a localised group confined to the Middle East. It has grown to become a glocalised threat where it tailors its global agenda to entice local groups – whether in Southeast Asia or now in South Asia, the attacks in Sri Lanka being its opening chess move.

As terrorism is transnational and borderless, it can undermine domestically social harmony of a country with a multicultural society such as Sri Lanka in South Asia or Singapore in Southeast Asia.

As witnessed in Sri Lanka, terrorism can also badly hurt a country's domestic economy as a result of falling business and consumer confidence. It can also cause a rapid drop in tourist arrivals due to the deliberate targeting of foreigners, as seen by the calculated attacks on hotels in Sri Lanka.

Clearly, ISIS has not been defeated and has the wherewithal to execute a deadly attack despite losing its physical caliphate in Syria. Their overriding motive remains the same – restoration of a caliphate of early Islam through the use of armed violence. Self-radicalisation via social media and use of local proxies to carry out suicide attacks forewarns the world of ISIS modus operandi.

That some of the perpetrators in the Sri Lanka attacks hailed from educated and wealthy families cements the notion that the profile of ISIS-affiliated attackers is no longer confined to being poor or lowly-educated. Self-radicalisation of today transcends social or class stratification.

The Sri Lankan attacks illustrate the resurgence of ISIS in South Asia, putting the region on alert and jolting the South Asian countries to take the ISIS threat seriously rather than remain in a state of denial. In addition to Pakistan where ISIS have claimed responsibility for suicide attacks in the country and announcing a new Pakistan ‘province’, Bangladesh has also been on alert post-Easter Sunday after a pro-ISIS telegram released a poster in the Bangla language, warning that an attack is imminent. The Maldives too is fast becoming an ISIS nerve centre in South Asia.

That there are credible links between ISIS-linked NTJ and localised radical-extremist groups in the southern Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have implored the Indian authorities to keep a close watch on them. India’s National Investigation Agency actually foiled a plot to execute a suicide attack in Kerala by nabbing an ISIS suspect who was inspired by the bombings in Sri Lanka.

National Security and Counterterrorism Intelligence

The Easter Sunday attacks revealed multiple gaps in Sri Lanka’s security architecture. The claims made by officials in the Sri Lankan government of being unaware of prior intelligence information intimated a weakened and uncoordinated intelligence information-sharing mechanism in the country. In 2016, then-Minister of Justice Wijeyadasa Rajapakse cautioned in parliament of the possible existence of ISIS-trained individuals in Sri Lanka, but was given the short shrift.¹

The failure of the Sri Lankan authorities to act on intelligence tip-offs – received from both within and outside of the country – was a principal cause of the Easter Sunday attacks. This is perhaps due to domestic political and economic fragility, lack of elite coordination among the government ministries, the intelligence services’ obsession with the revival of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the government’s preoccupation with a soon-to-be presidential election.

Taking national security for granted was a painful lesson for Sri Lanka, as Easter Sunday proved to be a wake-up call for the government to review holistically its entire security infrastructure. Beefing up counterterrorism intelligence-sharing needs to be a top priority. It also behoves the Sri Lankan authorities to pay serious attention to trends in global terrorism

¹ “32 SL Muslims have joined ISIS: Wijedasa claims” *Daily Mirror*, 18 November 2016.
<http://www.dailymirror.lk/119366/-SL-Muslims-have-joined-ISIS-Wijedasa-claims>

and its potential domestic implications so as to stay ahead of the curve in the battle against terrorism.

Militant groups supportive of ISIS or Al-Qaeda are also active in Southeast Asia and have carried out terror attacks, chiefly in Indonesia. The Easter Sunday bombings reinforce the importance of boosting counterterrorism intelligence-sharing, as evidenced by the close collaboration among Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to thwart terror attacks both on land and surrounding sea.

Dealing with fake news in a social media age has also become a centrepiece of preserving national security. Governments which consider fake news as an existentially perilous problem have been scouring robust and effective ways to counter falsehoods and curtail the spread of fake news.

In the aftermath of Easter Sunday, fake news was so ubiquitous and rampant that it alarmed the Sri Lankan authorities. Despite attempts by the government to impose a social media blackout, the surge in fake news via social media continued, peddling in misinformation and disinformation that further inflamed the domestic situation in post-Easter Sunday Sri Lanka. This illustrates the urgency for the Sri Lankan government to devise a more robust and comprehensive long-term strategy to counter fake news in the hope of ensuring greater stability and security in the country.

Muslims are Critical Assets in the War against Terrorism

Whether in the majority or minority, Muslims are critical assets and effective antidotes towards battling terrorism perpetrated by radical Muslim groups. For years, Sri Lankan Muslims, namely, Tamil-speaking Moors who comprise the majority of the heterogeneous Muslim minority in Sri Lanka, have alerted the government in Colombo to radical-extremists in NTJ and JMI, including the radical preacher Zahran Hashim, the alleged mastermind behind the Easter Sunday attacks.

In the local Sri Lankan Daily Mirror paper, a grouping called 'Peace Loving Moderate Muslims in Sri Lanka' issued a public statement in 2014 condemning the NTJ and cautioning that it was "fast becoming a cancer" within the Sri Lankan Muslim community due to its strict implementation of Islamic law and, concomitantly, relegating in importance the legal system of the country.²

Similar to the civil war when Sri Lankan Muslims provided the Sinhalese military with intelligence as they opposed the agenda of the Tamil separatists led by the LTTE, the Muslims also tipped off security officials on the location of radical-extremists post-Easter Sunday averting further terror attacks.

The vast majority of Muslims who are law-abiding citizens of Sri Lanka, including members of the main Islamic theological body, All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, have also disassociated themselves from NTJ and JMI. They denounced the terror acts as being contrary to Islamic

² "Radicalization among Sri Lanka's Muslims was slow and steady", *The Jakarta Post*, 25 April 2019. <https://www.apnews.com/89a58ddb39b4febae3f106fda593ee>

teachings, and a mischaracterisation and de-contextualisation of the Quran, the Islamic religious text.

The Middle East Dimension

The infiltration of Wahhabi-induced Islamisation from the Middle East into Sri Lanka contributed to the Easter Sunday attacks by fermenting or emboldening radical-extremist groups in Sri Lanka.

This linkage can be attributed to Sri Lankans returning home from the Middle East after studying or working in the region, with some arabising themselves and others becoming radical preachers.

The Sri Lankan Sinhalese, Tamil and English press have reported for many years that the Wahhabi ideology has spread across the Eastern province in the country, mostly in Kattankudy which is a densely populated Muslim town.³ The exclusivist Wahhabi ideology which practises an austere form of Islam divided the Muslim community in Sri Lanka which has traditionally been more inclusive – moderate in faith and pluralistic in culture. This consequently led to clashes between the ultraconservative Wahhabi-influenced and the more moderate non-Wahhabi Sufi Muslim groups in Kattankudy as early as 2004. Wahhabi-influenced Muslims also insulated themselves, turning inwards and withdrawing from the larger non-Muslim society altogether.

It is noteworthy that not all Wahhabi-influenced Muslims are terrorists and not all terrorists are Wahhabi-influenced Muslims. However, Wahhabi-influenced Muslims are inclined to embrace radical-extremist views, with some turning to violent acts oft-called terrorism, and others who do not.

The bombings portend the danger of countries soft-peddling on Wahhabi-induced Islamisation. Those in government such as the Sri Lankan authorities need to keep a close watch on returnees from the Middle East chiefly when they exhibit radical-extremist behaviour, ban hate preachers, and rehabilitate radical individuals to re-integrate them into the mainstream Muslim community.

Battling Islamophobia, Interfaith Dialogue and People-to-People Linkages

To get the Muslims on their side, the Sri Lankan government needs to better protect the country's Muslims against Islamophobic backlashes which have been on the rise after Easter Sunday. It is also imperative to avoid a repeat of anti-Muslim riots perpetrated by radical Sinhalese Buddhists in 2018, as this grievance may have been exploited by NTJ and JMI to recruit their foot soldiers.

³ "The veil and the 'Arabisation' of Lankan Muslims", *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 2016. <http://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/The-veil-and--the-%E2%80%98Arabianisation%E2%80%99-of-Lankan-Muslims/131-166219>.

The greater the instances of Islamophobia, the more fertile the ground will be for recruitment by radical-extremist groups which can be emboldened as local proxies to carry out terroristic acts.

Banning face coverings which includes the face veil worn by a tiny number of Sri Lankan Muslim women in the guise of public protection can be construed as a knee-jerk reaction by the Sri Lankan government. It misses the forest for the trees when it comes to strengthening national security, as the perpetrators were mostly male and none wore a face veil while carrying out the attacks. While there are Muslims who support the ban, there are others who see this move as scapegoating the Sri Lankan Muslims, feeding, therefore, into the Islamophobic narrative.

Religious leaders in Sri Lanka can be key calming influences and promoters of interfaith dialogue. Leading the way was the Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, who played a crucial role to unite Christians and Muslims in the aftermath of Easter Sunday. He had beseeched the Sri Lankan Christians “not to hurt even a single Muslim person because they are our brothers.”⁴

Interfaith dialogue has been elevated in importance after the tragic events in both Sri Lanka and New Zealand. It is known to alleviate religious violence and bring the different faiths together in harmony. So it may be worthwhile for Sri Lanka to set up a nationwide interreligious organisation.

Sri Lanka boasts a rich culture and civilisation as a South Asian country with outward links to Southeast Asia. However, this is not as well-known to the outside world. This can be attributed to Sri Lanka inadequately practising cultural diplomacy in its foreign policy, central to which is people-to-people linkages. Instead of being known as a cultural haven, Sri Lanka has come to be known as a haven for extremists and terrorists after that Easter Sunday. It is, therefore, in the national interest of the Sri Lankan government to alter this erroneous perception as placing emphasis on culture and civilisation can serve as an effective bulwark against both extremism and terrorism.

The China Interest and the Indian Ocean

The weakened security architecture in Sri Lanka captured China’s attention as it could potentially impact the latter’s economic and security interests both within Sri Lanka and the wider South Asian region. Sri Lanka is a key South Asian country for China’s Belt and Road Initiative and an important partner for China to protect its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. China is one of Sri Lanka’s major lenders and investors, and took over controversially the operation of the Hambantota Port.

Security lapses inside Sri Lanka disconcert China as Beijing has been giving military support to Sri Lanka, noting its key strategic position in the Indian Ocean. The Chinese policymakers see Sri Lanka as assisting to preserve China’s interests geopolitically by curtailing maritime

⁴ “Christian-Muslim clashes rock Easter attacks town in Sri Lanka”, *The Jakarta Post*, 6 May 2019. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/05/06/christian-muslim-clashes-rock-easter-attacks-town-in-sri-lanka.html>.

terrorism in Sri Lankan waters within the broader Indian Ocean, and securing the sea lines of communication.

The ISIS factor in the Easter Sunday attacks serves as a cautionary tale for China in its chronic repression of Muslims in Xinjiang. Similar to its modus operandi in Sri Lanka, ISIS could capitalise on the grievances of China's repressed Muslim minority, influencing the Uyghur Muslims to act as their local proxies. The possibility of an ISIS-style attack transpiring in China cannot be ruled out if the persecution of Chinese Muslims by the Beijing government continues to take place.

Conclusion

There are lessons to be learnt from the Easter Sunday tragedy in Sri Lanka. This encompasses the domestic for Sri Lanka and the international for the wider community, which includes specific regional constructs such as South and Southeast Asia.

To its credit, the government of Sri Lanka has begun to take concrete steps to learn some immediate lessons from Easter Sunday by beefing up security intelligence, shoring up the country's fragile peace and curbing intercommunal violence.

Just as Sri Lanka has shown remarkable resilience to bring about normalcy after the ravages of its civil war, there is sufficient reason to believe that Sri Lanka will be able to bounce back stronger from the carnage of Easter Sunday. Sri Lanka's regional neighbours would welcome this because a stronger and more united Sri Lanka bodes well for regional stability in South Asia, and also enabling it to garner greater bargaining leverage in managing relations with China.

It would require strong political leadership in Sri Lanka to bring the country's domestic house in order. While there is cause for optimism, the hard truth is that Sri Lanka still has a long way to go before it can genuinely achieve lasting peace and stability in political and strategic-security terms.

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