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The Easter Sunday Attacks: Struggle for the Soul of Sri Lankan Muslims

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SYNOPSIS

The Sri Lankan government is banning the public wearing of the face-veil by some Muslim women as a security measure in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks on churches and hotels claimed by ISIS. This is symptomatic of a deeper struggle: the battle to shape the soul of Sri Lankan Muslims. This has implications for countering future ISIS-type attacks.

COMMENTARY

MORE THAN a week after the horrific Easter Sunday suicide attacks on churches and hotels that killed about 250 people, some things are clearer: The international terror network ISIS has credibly claimed responsibility, while the strikes themselves were executed by violent elements of the obscure National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ), a local hardline Muslim group.

Colombo has scrambled to hunt down the remaining perpetrators whilst tightening security nationwide through emergency powers. One particularly provocative regulation that the government has just implemented is a ban on the public wearing of the face-veil used by some Muslim women. This new law appears to include clothing such as the *burqa* – an outer garment covering the body and the face – as well as the *niqab*, a veil that covers the face except the eyes. According to the government, the ban "is to ensure national security" as "no one should obscure their faces to make identification difficult".

Weight of History

While some women's rights activists criticised the ban, calling it "a violation" of the right of Muslim women "to practice their religion freely", other local Muslim activists

backed the move, acknowledging how “avoiding the niqab would help with easing some of the fears” that have gripped the nation since the attacks.

There is a larger question, however: how did a traditionally moderate Sri Lankan Muslim community produce nine suicide bombers imbibed with the violent extremist ISIS worldview? It appears that a complex interplay of history, politics, conflict, theological mutation and rising Buddhist extremism provides some preliminary answers.

Sri Lanka’s Muslims, who form about 10 percent of the Buddhist-majority nation’s population of 22 million, have been deeply impacted – like the Tamil Hindu (12 percent) and Christian (seven percent) minorities – by formative historical forces since independence from the British in 1948. Politically, although Sri Lanka is constitutionally a secular state and Articles 10 and 14 enshrine religious freedom and equality, Article 9 accords Buddhism a special status which the government is obliged to protect.

This provision has effectively relegated other religions like Islam to a secondary status in society. Likewise a political system has emerged that is geared around communal rather than multicultural politics. This sectarian, rather than an overarching Sri Lankan mindset has been inadvertently enhanced in other ways.

The Sinhalese Buddhist majority, forming 70 percent of the population, had historically felt threatened by the English-educated, Tamil-speaking minorities – both the Hindus and the Muslims. Thus, while legislation like the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 favoured the Sinhalese majority, the introduction of Sinhala as the only official language eight years later further intensified the minorities’ sense of not just political but also socio-economic marginalisation.

The lack of a unified education system based on a politically neutral lingua franca like English also exacerbated sectarian tendencies, because education and hence employment consequently became harder for minorities, including rural Muslims. Nevertheless, a politically significant business and bureaucratic class of wealthy English-educated urban Muslims successfully consolidated influence.

Impact of the Long War

The impact of the long civil war between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009 greatly compounded matters for Muslims in general. About 100,000 civilians were estimated to have been killed and a million displaced during the conflict. It ultimately involved the army invading and virtually decimating the northeastern Tamil-dominated part of the country – which was also home to many Muslims.

Moreover, while politically the Muslims sided with the Sinhalese-dominated government, provoking LTTE atrocities against them – such as the infamous Kattankudy mosque massacre of 1990 – in truth, Muslims fought and suffered on both sides. The enduring legacy of the war has been that sectarian mindsets have further sharpened on all sides.

Wahhabi Factor

Into this already inclement mix one must add the three decades-long theological impact of Middle Eastern Wahhabi fundamentalism. Some scholars assert that Islam – of the Sunni Shafie school of jurisprudence – arrived in Sri Lanka in the 7th century CE, brought ashore by Arab traders who decided to settle.

Malay traders from Java arrived several centuries later to add richness to the evolving local Muslim milieu. As in Southeast Asia, the this-worldly demands of face-to-face trade with non-Muslims, lubricated by open-minded Sufi influences from India, shaped a tolerant, accommodating Islam down the centuries, that blended easily with the Tamil-speaking milieu of eastern Sri Lanka. Not only did Muslims adopt many Tamil cultural traits, men and women mixed easily during festivals and even participated in Hindu temple events.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the oil boom and resultant Middle Eastern funding of mosques, plus increasing numbers of locals studying in the Middle East and exposed to strict Wahhabi ideas began to have a cumulative impact, including influencing dress codes and reducing inter-faith interaction.

Buddhist Fundamentalist Backlash

Furthermore, after the civil war and the emergence of global Islamist terrorism in the 2000s, Buddhist extremist groups like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) emerged, charging that Sri Lanka's increasingly Wahhabised Muslims posed a threat to the preminent status of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

In fact, in some Buddhist prophetic traditions, Sri Lanka is seen as the last bastion of Buddhism in the world, and hence the likes of BBS also closely follow developments in Buddhist majority countries like Myanmar and Thailand. Some BBS spiritual leaders, however, appear to enjoy popular support, which together with relative government apathy, has helped fuel their aggressive stance towards Muslims.

This produced a climate of intolerance that has contributed to Buddhist-Muslim clashes between 2014 and 2018. These recent clashes apparently helped radicalise the network behind the Easter Sunday bombings.

Struggle for the Soul of Sri Lankan Muslims

That the alleged ringleader of the Easter Sunday attacks himself – Zahran Hashim – was from the eastern town of Kattankudy, is no coincidence. Kattankudy has been subject to Middle Eastern-funded Wahhabi proselytisation for decades. The Kattankudy-headquartered NTJ which Zahran founded in 2014 is unequivocally a Wahhabi outfit, although its current leadership claim that they expelled Zahran in 2017 for his extremist views.

Some scholars contend that a Wahhabi fundamentalist outlook – together with the other contributory factors as those mentioned above – is hardly harmless. It can provide the necessary "mood music" for gestating the more violent global extremist ideology that ISIS promotes – one in which not just Buddhists but Christians and non-Muslim Westerners can be justifiably exterminated in the name of God.

The impending ban on clothing such as the niqab and burqa should therefore not be seen merely from a security versus rights perspective. More profoundly it symbolises an existential struggle for the soul of Sri Lankan Muslims. Operational measures aside, therefore, broader political, constitutional, educational, administrative, and socio-economic reform to strengthen a wider Sri Lankan identity and defend Muslim and minority rights are needed.

These must complement counter-ideological but more fundamentally, calibrated theological measures, to buttress the traditionally moderate Islam of Sri Lanka. Only a comprehensive multi-prong approach has the best chance of stemming ISIS-type attacks in the longer term.

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