

OPINION

Sri Lanka confronts Islamist violence

Recent progress in easing social tensions could unravel after Easter terrorist attacks



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Sri Lanka's near decadelong peace came to a bloody end on Easter Sunday when suicide bombers from what are believed to be two local extremist Muslim groups affiliated with Islamic State bombed churches and three luxury hotels on the island, killing more than 320 people.

Beyond the human tragedy, the attacks are significant for two reasons. First, they represent a change in global strategy for Islamic State, which has claimed responsibility for the attacks, after its virtual elimination in Syria and Iraq. Secondly, there is the political and economic hit to Sri Lanka's hard-won reputation, after decades of civil war, as a stable haven in the Indian Ocean region and a growing tourist destination.

It was only a month ago that U.S. President Donald Trump announced the military defeat of Islamic State after the fall of its last stronghold in Syria. But the deadly group has not withered away. Instead, it has morphed into new forms and could now be spreading its influence again to far corners of the world.

Islamic State is a classic example of the new face of terrorism. Totally devoid of any centralizing force or command structure, it has achieved fluidity and absorbed followers from around the globe.

The U.S. has made clear that it is no longer wants to wage a global war against Islamic State as the Trump administration increasingly focuses on revitalizing the American economy and limits military engagements overseas. The U.S. has suffered a heavy toll in its costly multiyear effort to eliminate Al Qaeda and its Islamic State offshoot. This attitude could change if the powerful, conservative Christian voting bloc in the U.S. demands action to protect Christians globally. But American officials know this would play into the long-term strategy first proposed by Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden of bleeding the U.S. in a protracted war against Islamic extremism.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka is trying to make sense of the bomb attacks that targeted its Christian minority and tourists at the same time that it is being forced to confront the reality of a deeply-fractured government and its awkward response to the aftermath of the attacks.

Any analysis of the repercussions of the terrorist attacks on Sri Lanka must consider the domestic situation and the country's foreign policy. Since the end of the 30-year civil war in 2009, successive governments have focused on revitalizing the economy, keeping reconciliation on track between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil populations, achieving security by strengthening political institutions, and enhancing the country's international status by fostering closer ties with regional and global powers.

It was foreign policy that marked one of the sharpest differences between the administrations of incumbent President Maithripala Sirisena and his predecessor, Mahinda Rajapaksa. Rajapaksa favored cooperation with China to help achieve stability by accepting financing from Beijing for major infrastructure projects. When Sirisena came to power in 2015, he sought to balance this approach through increased cooperation with India, the U.S., Japan and Australia. The goal was to establish Sri Lanka as a hub for investment and tourism in the Indian Ocean.

Sri Lanka was indeed successful in attracting tourists from the West, the Middle East and Asia. But the trade-off has been a weakening in border protection. When a country becomes a communications and transport hub, it means increasing connectivity. If connectivity is not managed properly it becomes a national security nightmare. The emergence of the local radical Islamic groups such as National Thowheed Jamat (NJT), which is believed by the authorities to have international terror linkages, must be viewed in this context.

The terrorist attacks were the result of a toxic mixture of identity politics, Wahhabi religious influence developed by Persian Gulf money, political corruption, organized crime, and lax border controls. Radicalized Muslim youths went to fight for Islamic State in Syria and returned home to continue the struggle in Sri Lanka. That alarming development appears largely to have escaped the notice of security officials, who openly expressed surprise that a little-known local group could carry out eight coordinated strikes using sophisticated high explosives.

It appears that the security establishment was more preoccupied with the growing geopolitical rivalries in the Indian Ocean and the country's response to the competing interests of China and the West. Little attention was paid to the upsurge of Islamic extremist activity in Asia. The attacks by the NJT demonstrate how a free and open society governed by weak and incoherent political structures, can become vulnerable.

The attacks will almost certainly hurt the economy, which is struggling with rising debt levels that are stifling growth. The government had been betting that rising tourism revenues and increased foreign direct investment would help solve this problem and stabilize the economy. Tourism has been booming in the last few years, with revenues amounting to \$4.4 billion in 2018, up 10% from 2017, and projected to reach \$5 billion in 2019.

The Easter bombings may wipe out these rosy forecasts and cause an economic downturn that would further weaken the government.

Ministers are in any case under heavy pressure in the face of accusations of ignoring warnings by foreign intelligence agencies of the terrorist attacks.

A top priority of the government will be to protect the Muslim community, which accounts for around 8% of the population in the Buddhist-dominated country. Most Muslims in Sri Lanka have long opposed religious radicalism. But they have also faced increased hostility the last few years due to a global rise in anti-Islamic sentiment and the success of Hindu nationalism in India.

Sri Lanka cannot win a battle against extremists if it loses the confidence of its Muslims. The country desperately needs political stability. The government must revise its national security strategy to focus on terrorism linked to trans boundary violent extremism and unify the intelligence community, military and police in an integrated institutional structure.

Sri Lanka needs closer cooperation between intelligence agencies and the armed forces, with the recruitment of more analysts. The military should beef up its intelligence functions. The air force, for example, lacks surveillance capabilities such as drones. The replacement of current, outdated information-gathering systems has been delayed by budgetary restraints.

Sri Lanka should address these intelligence shortcomings immediately in the face of the increased risk of transnational extremist violence. The next fight will be different from the long conflict the government waged against the Tamil Tigers. If nothing is done, the country will be flying blind in a perilous storm.



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