

## 2019 EASTER SUNDAY ATTACK IN SRI LANKA

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### Abstract

*This paper primarily examines the Easter Sunday bombings plotted and executed by a group of Sri Lankan Muslims and the impact of post-war conditions in Sri Lanka towards the Muslims in the country. Aimed at Christians and tourists, a string of bomb blasts was orchestrated killing hundreds of people in Sri Lanka as they gathered for Easter Sunday Mass. It is a controversial fact that the post-war violence, organized Islamophobia among overall non-Muslim communities and the Sinhalese in particular, has increased their fears and distrust towards Sri Lankan Muslims in general and state enterprises of Muslim political leaders who supported the successive Sri Lankan ruling class from independence through the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Although having meant an isolation of the community from the two main ethnic communities, the concessions that the Muslim community had won, has actively helped them to be proactive in their religious practices and thus paved the way for exclusive social and political choices. However, prior to the Easter Sunday attack there were still many motionless conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country. After the Easter Sunday bomb attack, these tensions heightened and spread through whole of Sri Lanka.*

**Keywords: Easter Sunday, bombings, conflicts, Muslims, non-Muslims**

### INTRODUCTION

Britain's decision to replace cinnamon culture with tea and coffee had implanted roots for the Sri Lankan civil war. In search of cheap labour, the British resettled Tamil workers from the lower castes of southern India on the island. Tamil workers settled in the closed plantation world and on the Jaffna Peninsula and the east coast of the island. They retained their language, traditions, and religion. Most of them were Hindus and Sinhalese were mainly Buddhist.

According to a census established in 1946, there were nearly 800,000 Tamils in Sri Lanka, who make up 12% of the population. In 1972, the country adopted the Sanskrit name of Sri Lanka as 'Rich Island'. However, with time ethnic tensions escalated into a civil war. The extremist movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by Velupillai Prabhakaran provoked a wave of attacks and waged a guerrilla war against the Sri Lankan army. At the same time, the Tamil people set aside moderating and started to engage in democratic political movements. However, in 2008 Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa decided to launch an all-out offensive that led to a "final attack". The conflict ended on May 17, 2009. The challenge for the country at present is to find ways to achieve peaceful reconciliation. After such a long series of conflicts, post-war Sri Lanka was developing very successfully. There have been no such conflicts in

Sri Lanka since then, as such, Sri Lanka has been peaceful for some time, despite having problems with Muslim disputes over certain ethnic and religious differences. Three Muslims were killed in clashes between extremist Buddhists and Muslims in Aluthgama on 16th June 2014. Anti-Muslim extremist Buddhist groups have been active in Sri Lanka for nearly two years, and this is the first time such a riot has erupted.

The single most important holy day of the Christian faith Easter Sunday Signifies resurrections and redemption for billions around the world but in Sri Lanka 21st of April 2019 was a day of horror. The biggest and the worst damage to Sri Lanka took place on that day. And it was the Easter Sunday attack. On Easter Sunday, 21st of April 2019, three mosques in Sri Lanka and three luxury hotels in Colombo were attacked by a series of suicide bombings by Islamic terrorists. Their target was mainly Christians and tourists. Attack type was Suicide bombings and the weapons they used were Acetone peroxide and Explosive Shrapnel. At least 267 people were killed and at least 500 were injured, including at least 45 foreigners, three police officers and eight bombers. President Maithripala Sirisena invoked emergency laws, providing police extensive powers and president later stated that emergency laws would be confined to dealing with the current terrorism threat and would not be used to impinge freedom of expression.

The locations of the bombings are as follows,

- 8.45am- St. Sebastian's Catholic Church, Negombo
- 8.45am- Kotahena, Kochchikade Catholic Church
- 8.47am- Kingsbury Hotel, Colombo
- 8.54am- Shangri-la Hotel, Colombo
- 9.10am- Zion Church, Batticaloa
- 9.12am- Cinnamon Grand Hotel, Colombo
- 1.30pm- Topical Inn Lodge, Dehiwala
- 2.25pm- Housing Complex in Dematagoda.

One of the Shangri-La bombers was Saharan Hashim, the leader of a local Jihadist group responsible for ISIS attacks. Hashim is the leader of the banned National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ). He attacked Shangri-La, along with another Islamist, Ilham Ahmed Mohammed Ibrahim. The man who bombed the nearby Cinnamon Grand Hotel was Ilham's older brother, Inshaf Ahmed. The third hotel targeted was Kingsbury, bombed by a man named Mohamed Assam Mubarak Mohamed. A local named Ahmed Mouas targeted St. Anthony's Church. The St. Sebastian bomber was Mohamed Hasthun. Abdul Latif, who was educated in Britain and Australia, failed to detonate a bomb at a luxury hotel, but detonated it at a guesthouse situated near the Dehiwala Zoo.

The series of suicide bombings that started at 8.45 am in Kochchikade and Katuwapitiya churches ended with the explosion at the Dematagoda housing scheme at 2.25 pm. The attack, which targeted three Catholic churches and three hotels, killed 277 people (including eight suicide bombers) and wounded more than 400 others. The dead included 40 foreigners and 45 children. The police named Saharan Hashim, the leader of the National Thowheeth Jama'ath extremist Muslim organization as the main suspect of the attack. Saharan Hashim is suspected to be a member of ISIS and to have received support and even weapons from ISIS members to execute the blast. The SITE Internet Intelligence Unit has stated that it has been published on social media. Three people who were present at the house before the bombing have released a video to the internet stating that they are ready to sacrifice their lives for their organization at any moment. Meanwhile, the Islamic State (ISIS) has once again warned on its social media networks that there will be "surprising" attacks around the world in the future and that this will not be the end of the attacks. ISIS has carried out attacks in 15 countries around the world in the week since the attack in Sri Lanka. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith condemned the terrorist attacks that morning. He called on the public to remain calm and not to take the law into their hands. During his Easter service, Pope Francis expressed his condolences to all those affected by the terrorist attacks, including the Christian community. Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith was more concerned about the plight of the people than the government had shown at this time. According to Al Jazeera the special committee of parliament has reported at length on the intelligence received in connection with the attack, and the special committee of parliament has observed that the State Intelligence Service has failed to alert the state security apparatus on the importance of the intelligence it has received regarding possible attacks. A year has passed but no one has yet been properly identified as responsible for the planned act of violence. It was revealed in the media at the time some Members of Parliament and Ministers of the Sri Lankan Parliament were aware of such a serious situation, but they did not take any action before the bombings to safeguard the lives of the people. Example: "The Sri Lankan government was aware of some foreigners arriving in Sri Lanka to spread what justice minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakse called Islamic extremism. In November 2016 he told parliament that 32 Sri Lankan Muslims from "well-educated and elite" families joined the ISIL." On the 4th of April 2019, the Chief of State Intelligence revealed to the Parliamentary Committee that he had received initial intelligence about the attack via WhatsApp from his source, and that he had received similar information in writing on April 5th, 2019 but did not disclose to the Committee the source of the information received. The Commander of the Armed Forces and the Commanders of the three-Armed Forces had participated in the discussion after the Chief of the National Intelligence Service had provided the information to the Secretary of Defense, and it was revealed that no intelligence had been paid to the attack. However, these incidents show that it is unfortunate that Sri Lanka is facing such a crisis at a time when it is slowly developing with foreign aid from countries such as China, even after years of war with the LTTE. It is also a crucial matter of concern that even the true falsity of the unfortunate incident has not yet been properly discovered. At the time of the incident, the government was reluctant to carry out legal research on the matter, but a year later it has now resumed research.

## **MUSLIM OCCUPATION IN CEYLON**

With the arrival of Arab merchants in the 7th century, Islam began to spread in Sri Lanka. Arab merchants and their native wives, whom they married after having them converted to Islam, were the first to embrace the Islamic faith in Ceylon. When considering the history of Muslim occupation in Ceylon, there were almost no outstanding problems with Muslims in the history of Sri Lanka as the two major contributors to the intra-state conflicts in Sri Lanka were the black July followed by the Sri Lankan Civil war. Despite these conflicts Muslims living in Sri Lanka maintained a healthy rapport with other ethnicities.

The Sri Lankan flag's green band reflects Islam and the Moorish ethnic community. About 1,967,227 persons adhere to Islam as per the census of 2012. Islam is a minor religion in Sri Lanka with 9.7% of the Sri Lankan population practicing Islam. Ramadan festival and Haj festival are the main festivals celebrated by Muslims in Sri Lanka.

According to M.C.A. Hameed, president of the All Ceylon Thareekathul Mufliheen, a Sufi order whose name means "path of the fearless victorious," Sri Lankan Muslims then began to find employment in Saudi Arabia, and many young Sri Lankan Muslims were awarded scholarships by Saudi universities. As a result, it is conceivable that the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has changed somewhat. Before the Easter bomb attack no one was told not to wear the niqab and the burka-which cover most or whole of the face, on the contrary to their culture but with the bombing the Sri Lankan society underwent changes completely. When analysing about the Easter bomb attack, Sri Lankan government authorities acknowledged all eight suicide bombers were Sri Lankan citizens affiliated with National Thowheeth Jama'ath, a local radical Islamist organization accused of having international links. "National Monotheism Organization" is a Sri Lankan Islamic terrorist jihadist group implicated in the 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings. It is believed to have ties to the Islamic State.

## **THE POST-EASTER SUNDAY BOMB ATTACK AND THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY**

The post-Easter attack affected the Muslim community in Sri Lanka in unprecedented levels and showed a clear shift, in comparison to previous life they enjoyed in the diverse social structure of the country.

The Muslims who were engaged in their own businesses had to close their shops with this bomb attack. During these events, Sheik, an ordinary citizen, felt it was best to travel to his mother's house in Colombo for a couple of days. Sheik returned home after five nights. But he was still worried as his two young daughters are attending a Catholic school, and he is not sure whether they're still going to be admitted. "I offer my deepest condolences to all those who lost loved ones, and I understand their feelings," said Sheik. "But I am begging them to please tolerate us, bear us, and not to think that we are terrorists," he said, holding back tears. Mohammed Iliyas was leading a prosperous business in his hardware store in western Sri Lanka. Trade has now collapsed, and its losses are increasing. Muslims minority live in Sinhalese majority communities in this region. For ages, Mr. Iliyas, who is a Muslim, has spent

his days helping people coming from all religious backgrounds. Yet it changed since the Easter Sunday bombing of Sri Lanka in April. "Since the Easter Sunday bombings, almost 90% of my Sinhalese customers have stopped buying from my shop. My business has gone down significantly, and I have lost hundreds of thousands of rupees," Mr. Iliyas said. It is very unfortunate to be looked with suspicion even when they were not the ones who committed the crime. And, he said that "Though some customers have started coming back in recent weeks it is not enough. If this trend continues then I am in big trouble". Most Muslims believe that they have been demonized since the suicide bombings, and group merchants claim they have become potential targets.

Regarding the inconvenience caused to Muslim women, the perceptions of Muslim women vary greatly across social-cultural atmospheres. At the same time, their commitment to Islam is a mutual force that influences their life to different degrees and gives them a collective identity that can help to transcend the wide spectrum of ethnic, social, and economic gaps between them. Muslim women traditional Islamic clothing were also aimed after Easter Sunday as the government explicitly prohibits face headwear in public, due to matters of security. While niqab and burka-which cover most or all the face and are worn by some Muslim women-were not expressly identified, right-wing organizations argue that even those wearing head scarves have been abused. Muslim women working in government offices are facing problems. In some places, those who are wearing only headscarves are being asked to go home and come back wearing a saree," said Juwairiya Mohideen, director of the Muslim Women Development Trust. It is unfortunate that Sri Lankans have restored a feeling of fear even to sit next to Muslim women in a bus, who is wearing the traditional Abaya, thus embarrassing even those who have not been wronged. One Muslim widow said that "I have stopped wearing the abaya and hijab in the last few days because of the comments and looks I was getting".

Another point that has been blamed on Muslims is the bombings that happened in churches and hotels in Sri Lanka are retaliations for the New Zealand's Christchurch Mosque shootings. Most of these protests were against Muslims who were innocent, most of whom were refugees from Pakistan. Someone had hung up signs in Sinhalese and English that read, "We don't need Pakistanis here." This is what Muslims expressed about their sorrow. "We are innocent people who didn't do anything wrong," he said. "I feel pain after this terrorist attack, only pain. I don't know what happened, what is going on now" said Ahmed, a Muslim who fled Negombo after Easter bombings. Javid Yusuf, a talented lawyer in Sri Lanka representing works in human rights and peace and conflict resolution. He said that "From the time of the ancient kings, Sri Lanka has been in my view a model of co-existence of harmony for centuries — Buddhist, Sinhalese, Muslims," Yusuf said. "Unfortunately, after independence, we had a war; a lot of innocent people were killed."

This move comes in the midst of rising Islamophobia and anti-Muslim protests across the world, which was not widespread in Sri Lanka prior to the Easter bombings, and concerns rise that Muslim student might be targeted at campuses. It also comes as massive demonstrations erupted on campuses against the planned private Muslim university in Batticaloa, locally known as 'Sharia University'. However, in the

heightened environment of the bombings, university students unleashed a series of demonstrations demanding that the government shut down the infamous 'Sharia University,' a private school in the Batticaloa district of Punani, also known as the Batticaloa Campus, saying that it would promote extreme Islamic religious doctrine.

### **POLICE INVESTIGATIONS**

Sri Lanka's inquiry further into April 2019 Easter bombing attacks is in its "final stages," officials said, raising suspicion that the suicide bombers were funded by "two foreign outfits." 200 suspects have been arrested; the investigation is now focusing on financial networks connecting suicide bombers; the role of extremist powers is suspected. Over 200 individuals have been apprehended by the Colombo Crime Division, Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and Terrorism Investigation Department (TID) after last summer's attacks. For allegedly failing to act on intelligence about the assaults, the country's then-police chief and Secretary to the Ministry of Defense have been charged with murder. 135 people have been arrested in connection with the explosions, which have been blamed on the "National Thowheeth Jama'ath extremist organization." They have not been charged yet. Easter celebrations were tempered this year due to a state-wide indefinite curfew enacted to combat the new coronavirus. The current investigation team took over after President Gotabaya Rajapaksa won a landslide victory in the November 2019 presidential elections, where he campaigned on the platform of national security and won with 52.25 percent of the vote. His campaign pointed the finger squarely at the previous government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe for failing to act on a prior intelligence report, including one from India, about a possible terror strike.

Mr. Rajapaksa's recently established government reformed the CID to continue the investigations. More arrests followed soon after. The previous CID squad had already apprehended over a hundred people. According to a former official, its officers collected and analysed data from all the phones and gadgets confiscated from the suicide bombers' network with the help of the Australian Federal Police and the FBI. It aided the CID in mapping out the command structure, he told *The Hindu*, declining to be identified due to the sensitivity of the investigation. Colombo, 1 February 2021 – Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa received the final report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the Easter Sunday attack in 2019. The Chairman of the Commission, Supreme Court Judge Janak de Silva, presented President Rajapaksa with the final report this morning at the Presidential Secretariat. Last year, Cardinal Ranjith called for the government to resign over its apparent refusal to examine the assaults as an "international conspiracy." President Maithripala Sirisena's government lost the November elections, and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's younger brother Gotabaya took charge. President Sirisena first blamed the bombs on Islamic militants, but later claimed foreign drug dealers were behind them, ostensibly to destabilize his anti-narcotics campaign. "We showed love to the enemy who attempted to destroy us," Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith said at an Easter mass. "We forgave them," he added, adding that rather than retaliating, the country's

Catholic minority had pondered Jesus' message of hope, which had helped to calm tensions.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Colombo, the commercial capital city of Sri Lanka, eight bombs blasted during the Easter Sunday in 2019 in famous hotels and ancient churches; hundreds of innocent people were murdered in a brutal manner in other coastal towns in the west and the east. The attack was a surprise to terrorism experts as the Islamic Government reported that the country was not aware of the jihadi violence. Many of the assailants were well educated and two were scientists with rich family backgrounds which gave advantages for the plotting of cells. However, there were evidence from January 2017 that persons affiliated with the Islamic States and National Thowheeth Jama 'at were increasingly supporting and lacking local law enforcement. The Sri Lankan attacks may be an early proof of a significant and revived interest in South Asia by the Islamic State after defeats in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, cabinet branches have thwarted attempts to overhaul the fragmented police and security services which could not deter threats, prompting concerns from international allies. Instead of bringing the nation back to an era of conflicts and cliffs, Sri Lankan leaders should work on repairing the failed state security apparatus. They should avoid alienating legally respectful Muslim people, who account for 10% of the population. The Easter Sunday bombing underwent as the deadliest day in the history of Sri Lanka associated with the jihadist activity, and the original experience from Muslim to Christian mass violence. It also turns the spotlight away from the need for the state security apparatus to correct vulnerabilities found during Easter attacks.

The government must depoliticize the intelligence and police approaches to react more efficiently to potential threats. It must end activities and policies that destroy innocent Muslim families and must discourage abuse against Muslims—including taking responsibility for those who commit violent crimes. The Sri Lankan government has many potential explanations for complacency. The state has implemented nothing to deal with the instability, probably obstructed by the police and intelligence authorities. Public wrath was aimed toward nearly two million Muslims in the world whose leaders are suspected that Saharan and his leaders have not predicted, nor prevented radicalization. A harsh and dangerous reaction against Muslims has been taking place since the Easter terror attacks. Muslim companies were boycotted in the island in the months after the attack. Complicate investigations into the attacks and their inability to deter them is the competition between President Maithripala Sirisena and Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe. The rise of Islamic movements and mosques galvanized Muslims after 1977. Through time, the re-energy of Muslims whose ethnic identity has been built up by Islamic elites has reinforced this alienation. The Muslim Community was not able to use Islamic traditions and principles to establish stability in the course of this re-emergence which would have contributed to the alleviation of unrest from the 30-year-old ethnic war. In the broader sense of settled disputes, certain positive ways are addressed in Islamic traditions to alleviate tensions between Islamists and non-Muslims.

In general, Sri Lankan State should regulate all religious education materials and institutions, including Madrasa. Unless the State monitors schools, similar to private schools, there should not be any support from other countries to eradicate religious extremism. College students with a greater understanding of a given religion should be eligible for every religious school. It is time to turn around, lower tensions in the society and focus on the vital and unfinished work of connecting an ethnically divided community. Sri Lanka is a war-scarred society and has seen extreme violence for many decades. The powers state government seeks to confront are nevertheless unseen, motivated and funded probably by global terrorist networks. The war is likely to be lengthy and prolonged and many fears that as long as politics are broken and anarchic, the country will remain to be weak and vulnerable for terrorism and insurgencies.

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