

COMMENT

Easter Attacks: The days after in Sri Lanka

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It is important to focus on popular solidarities and commonalities, instead of yielding to insecurity.

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The first reaction of disbelief after receiving news of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, with more than 350 now confirmed dead, has not dissipated. The emotions are reminiscent to what most of us felt when we first heard news of the 2004 tsunami. Sri Lankans are not unused to tragedy or shocks — we, after all, have lived with an ethnic conflict, two insurrections, riots, assassinations and constitutional coups.

Nor is the disbelief simply because the war had ended 10 years ago and we were somehow lulled into a state of peace and non-violence. Rather, like when the tsunami happened, it is simply impossible to make sense of what is happening. This is unprecedented, nothing like this has happened before and nothing that has happened before has prepared us for this.

As I obsessively search for and read the numerous live updates, reports, op-ed pieces and media analyses on the attack and talk to friends and colleagues, I am no closer to understanding what happened than I was on Sunday morning. And in this age of the 24-hour news cycle, status updates and instant sharing of feelings, information and thoughts, I long for the time to pause, to reflect, and to grieve, without interruption.

The IS hand

On the day after the blasts, we were told that an organisation known as the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) was responsible for the attack and that several individuals have been arrested. All arrested so far have been Sri Lankan. On Tuesday, the Amaq news agency of the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attacks, and then a video was released of alleged bombers pledging allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Disturbingly, various members of the government have intimated that intelligence information had been available, but had not been communicated to those responsible for decision-making, including the Prime Minister. That this is an obvious carry-over from the rift between the executive and legislative branches of government since the incidents of October 2018 is evident. The insouciance with which this is being discussed by government Ministers and officials shows an unbelievable lack of awareness, that far from making any party look good, this revelation reflects the sheer incompetence, inadequacy and arrogance of the government.

The immediate feelings of incoherent rage that many of us are feeling in response to this spectacular lack of leadership and statesmanship in the country are easier to understand and analyse. The pettiness and immaturity of the leadership are all too clear. In this, what is going to be, an election year in Sri Lanka, perhaps we can even do something about it. But the rest is far more incomprehensible and harder to deal with.

Who are the NTJ? What are their local and global networks? How could they have found the resources and expertise to carry out such a well-coordinated attack of this magnitude? As evidenced by the remarkable promptness with which arrests have been made and locations of suspects and explosives found, the military and security apparatus that defeated the LTTE is still functioning.

To my knowledge, researchers who have worked on radical Islamist groups in Sri Lanka have not to date found any with the strength to carry out an operation of this scale on its own.

Certainly, small groups, espousing various causes, some highly inflammatory, have been noted, and in fact, the NTJ had been reported for activities such as defacing Buddhist statues. But these were mainly seen as linked to local politics and the religious tensions that have been seen recently. There are many gaps in the story so far.

The post-war fallout

But more devastating are the implications of this attack for Sri Lanka's post-war society. If international experiences are anything to go by, the response to such attacks has been increased levels of securitisation, surveillance and legal reforms aimed at strengthening the state and military apparatus. Sri Lanka has had a bitter experience of this in the past and what it has meant for ordinary people. Last year, a controversial Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) was placed before Parliament to replace the existing, draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Prior to this attack, many were working desperately for a simple repeal of the PTA, without it being replaced by the proposed CTA. This attack will make this effort very much harder.

Globally, there is plenty of evidence to show that widening socio-economic inequalities, increasing economic precariousness and the concentration of power within a closed circle of global (and local) economic and political elites can sow the seeds of discontent, intolerance and terrorism. We also know well that no longer are incidents simply 'local' — already, the narrative of what has happened in Sri Lanka has been globalised and there are many agendas which are riding on it. As one anguished post on Facebook noted, "we are no longer even allowed to name and interpret our own tragedies."

In Sri Lanka, we have been struggling, especially since the end of the war, but also from long before, to combat ethno-religious nationalisms, entrenched social injustice and a political establishment that is increasingly out of touch with the people. We have been struggling to find a language and political strategies that can offer an alternative vision for the people, to find leaders who can inspire hope rather than contempt and cynicism. This attack is a huge setback for all those efforts. It has unleashed the kind of fears and insecurities that are demanding shrill rather than measured responses. And waiting in the wings are those who are harking back to the myth of a more 'secure' past and offering a return to a 'strong' leader. So when we try to make sense of these events, it is also important to consider which groups will seek to gain political advantage in the days to come.

Difficult as it is, we must continue to be sceptical of the narratives of terror and counter-terror as the only explanations and responses to what is happening. The conditions for extremism are within our own homes and communities. It must be countered not by suspicion and hate but by securing

our relationships and challenging extremism in all its forms. Fear and insecurity are producing panic-stricken responses and a strengthening of anti-Muslim sentiments rather than a focus on our solidarities and commonalities.

It is important, therefore, to hold on, with all our hearts, to images and news of the winding lines of people wanting to donate blood at the National Blood Transfusion Service, the groups of people who are organising vigils in their homes and communities, visiting the bereaved and the injured, offering whatever comfort and support they can. The coming together of strangers in the most unexpected of ways to help each other and the grief (not anger) on the faces of people are indications that neither the attacks nor the dominant narrative being offered reflect the 'true' character, resilience and ethos of Sri Lanka and its people.

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