

Punish those responsible for the Sri Lanka attacks, not Muslim minorities

By Farahnaz Ispahani

Religious Freedom Institute (24.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2XHqs3K> – The largest single attack on Sri Lankan soil was not claimed by any extremist group until early Tuesday when ISIS declared responsibility. ISIS has conducted targeted attacks on Easter in the past, so the likelihood that the little-known Sri Lankan Islamic radical group, National Towheeth Jamaath (NTJ), is actually an ISIS affiliate or franchisee seems plausible.

Sri Lankans are trying to pick up the pieces after this attack, which consisted of a series of coordinated bomb blasts that ripped through churches and hotels on Easter Sunday, leaving almost 321 people dead and over 500 injured at last count. Until the ISIS claim of responsibility, the Sri Lankan government was pinning the blame on a local Islamist extremist group. This was seen by some as an attempt to create friction between the Christian and Muslim communities and demonize Sri Lankan Muslims right before the elections. The government, beset with conflict between the president and prime minister, is already being accused of negligence in ignoring intelligence about the attacks.

World faith leaders have expressed condemnation and sympathy, including Pope Francis, who expressed closeness to the Sri Lankan Christian community and said “to all the victims of such cruel violence, I entrust to the Lord all those who are tragically gone and I pray for the wounded and all those who suffer because of this tragic event.”

Egypt’s Al-Azhar University is the Sunni Muslim world’s

foremost religious institution, and it's Grand Imam Shaikh Ahmed al-Tayeb said, "I cannot imagine a human being could target the peaceful on their celebration day," and that "Those terrorists' perverted disposition goes against the teachings of all religions." "I pray," added Shaikh Tayeb, "that God grants patience to the families of the casualties and recovery to the injured."

The Sri Lankan government said they were investigating international assistance to NTJ. Until yesterday, NTJ was an obscure Sri Lankan Islamist group best known for vandalizing Buddha statues and demanding that women be fully veiled.

Muslim and Christian discord has been very minimal in Sri Lankan society. Both Christians and Muslims are religious minorities there. Since the major conflict issue for Sri Lanka in the past was always ethnic, the main source of unrest was a decades long, head-on clash between the ethnic Tamils and the Sinhalese.

Amarnath Amarasingam, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue who studies extremism in Sri Lanka and the region said in a recent interview in the New Yorker Magazine:

As far as I know, there was no real conflict between Muslims and the Christians. Particularly in the east, they lived quite happily. The Tamil communities, the Christian communities, the Muslim community—it is a very diverse area. And I would say the same thing about Colombo. There was no real conflict like that. It is partly the targeting of the Christian population that makes me think it is not just a local-born and -bred Muslim organization that planned and carried out this operation. The targeting of churches, Christian communities, during Easter has a very international-jihadist component to it.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2017 [Annual Religious](#)

Freedom Report:

Attacks on religious minorities continued unabated from the previous year. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) documented 97 incidents of attacks on churches, intimidation and violence against pastors and their congregations, and obstruction of worship services. The Sri Lankan Muslim Council (MCSL) reported dozens of violent attacks on mosques and Muslim prayer rooms during the year, especially during Ramadan. Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, Buddhist Power Force) continued to promote the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist majority and denigrate religious and ethnic minorities, especially via social media.

It is very difficult to understand how a small, local terrorist group like NTJ could coordinate an attack of this scale unless supported from the outside, and with ISIS's recent claim of involvement, it may be the source of such support. This coordinated act of terror is reminiscent of the Pulwama attack in Kashmir recently. In the Pulwama attack, a Pakistani based extremist Islamist group, Jaish e Muhammad, claimed responsibility. The suicide bomber was a young local Kashmiri from Pulwama district and a member of Jaish-e-Mohammed.

This attack is also reminiscent of the Mumbai, India attacks in July 2011, which consisted of a series of three coordinated bomb explosions at different locations across the city. Jaish e Muhammad also took responsibility for that incident.

From the start, ISIS had been discussed as a possible suspect. They have often targeted both ancient and modern churches and peoples, including Christians, Yezidis, and Shia Muslims. Moreover, it is indisputable that they have the capability. When ISIS's AMAQ news propaganda agency claimed responsibility yesterday for the blasts, no one should have been taken by surprise. The group, which has previously made a series of

unsupported claims, did not provide any evidence.

Elsewhere in the region, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party colleagues have been intensifying their anti-Muslim rhetoric and pursuing anti-Muslim immigration legislation during the Indian elections. In addition, Pakistani politicians, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, used the Blasphemy and Anti-Ahmadiyya card to denigrate Muslims during his election campaign. The cancer of hatred for 'the other' has today spread all over South Asia and now, increasingly, in Southeast Asia as well.

Even in the West today politicians play up religious sentiment and anti-otherness to win elections. In this context we must keep in mind that the Sri Lankan elections are also on the horizon, slated to be held by December of this year.

The use of hate speech and naming and blaming religious minorities for attacks on civilians and military personnel is extremely dangerous. The religious minorities in Sri Lanka are facing greater persecution today than at any other time in the nation's history. This hatred and otherization of Sri Lankan Christians and Muslims may play well to the Buddhist majority, particularly before a national election, but as the global trend shows, this approach damages a society's integrity, economy, and finally its stability. After fighting an ethnic war for decades one hopes the Sri Lankan government tones down its blame game and finds the actual culprit behind this highly sophisticated attack. Upon the conclusion of a proper investigation, may the government act decisively to punish those responsible according to all international mechanisms available.

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