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Sri Lanka Bans Face Coverings as it Scrambles to Respond to Easter Attacks

By Billy Perrigo

TIME (02.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GuOAAD> - Eight days after the April 21 bombings in Sri Lanka left at least 253 dead, the government announced that all face coverings would be banned in public, saying the move would help the search for those involved. The bombings, carried out by alleged Islamist militants who targeted churches and high-end hotels, were the most fatal violence the country has suffered since its civil war ended in 2009. Although the ban did not specifically mention Islamic veils, critics have denounced the measure for stirring suspicions against Muslims, who make up 9.7% of Sri Lanka's diverse population.

After ISIS on April 23 claimed responsibility for the attacks, there were reports of mobs roaming the streets and beatings of Muslim residents. Nearly 1,000 mostly Muslim refugees fled or were forced out of their homes in the week following the bombings, according to Human Rights Watch. No deaths have so far been reported, but in that climate, Muslim community leaders say, the ban on face coverings was ill-conceived—especially given that they had already agreed to a voluntary suspension of veil wearing.

The face-covering ban hasn't been the only decision to draw scrutiny of Sri Lanka's response to the Easter Sunday attacks. For nine days after the attacks, the government blocked social-media services including Facebook and WhatsApp in an attempt to stop the spread of misinformation; it's unclear whether that made a difference. Meanwhile, some of those behind the plot are still believed to be at large. A shoot-out on April 26 left 15 people dead, including three suspected suicide bombers and six children, according to authorities.

The Sri Lankan government has been heavily criticized for its failure to prevent the attacks despite receiving advance warnings from Indian intelligence agencies. The country has a long history of ethnic tension, and in recent years Buddhist nationalists (who are part of the Sinhalese majority) have attacked both Muslims and Christians. With presidential elections due to be held by the end of 2019, whether their government can protect the country from future violence—without widening religious fault lines—is on the minds of many Sri Lankans.

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 its 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.

Easter Sunday bomb attacks against churches and hotels: Over 300 dead

Human Rights Without Frontiers strongly condemns the bomb attacks on hotels and churches in Sri Lanka targeting Christians and other innocent civilians. The bombings have left over 300 dead and hundreds more injured.

CNN (23.04.2019) - <https://cnn.it/2Uze9nX> - The first wave of attacks struck during packed Easter Sunday services between 8:45 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.

Suicide bombers struck three churches around the country: St. Antony's, a popular shrine in the capital, Colombo; St. Sebastian's in Negombo, north of the capital, where 102 people died; and the Zion Church, in the eastern port city of Batticaloa.

About the same time, more blasts ripped through three luxury hotels in Colombo: The Shangri-La, the Cinnamon Grand and the Kingsbury, all popular with foreign tourists and the country's business community.

At the Shangri-La, the bomb was detonated just after 9 a.m at the Table One cafe as guests were eating breakfast.

Later in the day, a blast rocked a hotel in front of the Dehiwala Zoo in Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia. The final blast struck a private house in Mahawila Gardens, in Dematagoda, during a raid in connection with the earlier attacks, officials said. Three police officers were killed.

It is not clear why Christians were targeted: Christianity is a minority religion in Sri Lanka, accounting for 7.4% of the total population of 21.4 million. According to census data, 70.2% of Sri Lankans identify as Buddhist, 12% Hindu and 9.7% Muslim.

Who were the victims?

BBC (23.04.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2IQ7u6U> - Most of those who died were Sri Lankan nationals, including scores of Christians attending Easter Sunday church services.

Sri Lankan officials said 38 foreign nationals were among the dead, with another 14 unaccounted for. The death toll includes at least eight British citizens and at least 10 Indian nationals.

The mass funeral for about 30 victims took place at St Sebastian's church in Negombo, north of Colombo, which was one of the places targeted in Sunday's blasts. Another funeral service was scheduled for later on Tuesday.

A moment of silence was also observed at 08:30 on Tuesday, reflecting the time the first of six bombs detonated.

Flags were lowered to half-mast and people, many of them in tears, bowed their heads in respect.

Why was Sri Lanka chosen as a target? Islam expert Susanne Schröter answers...

DW (23.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZtFdcb> - It must be made clear that Sri Lanka is a country where Christians have never been a group with much political significance. Furthermore, the attackers could not latch on to a narrative of conflict between Muslims and Christians, because this conflict doesn't exist in Sri Lanka. This is why what happened was very unusual.

I think that Sri Lanka was chosen because it was an easy target. The authorities were obviously ill-equipped and were not being vigilant, although they had reportedly been warned of imminent attacks.

The brutality of the attacks, and the symbolic timing and location, were intended to elicit the greatest possible international impact. The terrorists clearly achieved this aim and sent a message: "You can use international forces to drive us out of Syria and Iraq, but we haven't been defeated and we are still powerful."