

# Sri Lankan Attacks and Inter-Communal Relations

Hedges, Paul; Fernando, Jude Lal

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## **Sri Lankan Attacks and Inter-Communal Relations**

*By Jude Lal Fernando and Paul Hedges*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The recent Sri Lankan attacks risk stigmatising the Muslim community in Sri Lanka while reshaping the fragile inter-communal relations in new ways.*

### **COMMENTARY**

SRI LANKA has had a turbulent history in recent centuries, especially over the last few decades. This has often been linked to rivalries between communities perceived to be different by either, or both, religion and ethnicity.

The tensions arising have fluctuated over time, and the recent attacks potentially may cause a new arrangement of tensions and communal divisions in this context. We can look historically to help understand the current context.

### **Colonial Context**

Muslims had been in Sri Lanka long before Western colonialism and had relatively good relations with the local population. Practising a traditional form of South Asian Islam, they integrated readily to the local context. After European colonialism arrived, with waves of Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule over the island, antagonism between Buddhists and Christians developed.

At first, it appears that the Buddhists were welcoming of the Christians. However, the openness they exhibited was not reciprocated, and by the late 19th century fierce polemics and debates arose, with Buddhist spokespeople in some famous debates eventually defeating their Christian opponents. The colonial nexus also gave rise to a growing Sinhala Buddhist nationalism focused on Sri Lanka as the “isle of dharma”, the place where true Buddhism was found and protected.

These Sinhala Buddhist nationalist sentiments were part of the discourse as Sri Lanka attained independence, but it was first established as a secular state with the majority Sinhalese and the largest minority, the Tamils, being equal partners in the nation state. However, in due course, the Sinhalese nationalists attained ascendancy and the country's constitution changed to reflect a strong bias for the Sinhalese.

### **Tamil-Sinhalese Conflict**

This Sinhalese bias led to growing tensions with the Tamils and in due course a civil war in which the Tamil Tigers sought to create an independent state on the island. While the Sinhalese were predominantly Buddhist and the Tamils predominantly Hindus, the Tamil Tigers did not see their fight as a religious conflict but as a secular one.

Many Tamils were also Christians and Muslims who largely sided with the Sinhalese, but nevertheless they fought and died on both sides. Moreover, extreme nationalists on the Sinhalese side portrayed the civil war as an existential threat to the Buddhist tradition, and the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism was often highlighted, including by some monks who even urged warfare in the name of Buddhism to protect the *sasana*, or tradition.

With the end of the civil war in 2009, the communal tensions took a new turn. This was initially primarily against the Christians who were perceived as seeking to engage in aggressive missionary campaigns against the Buddhists. This returned to motifs of the colonial period with Western Christians perceived as a threat to the true lineage of Buddhism found in Sri Lanka. However, it was not long before anti-Muslim feeling arose, promoted by a number of extremist Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups.

### **Buddhist-Muslim Tensions**

The campaign against Muslims was partly fuelled by the global "war on terror" which was often perceived to be against Islam, with Muslims often framed as an aggressive force. Memories of what was seen as the destruction of Buddhism in South Asia under Muslim invaders played into this.

However, it was the contemporary context which fuelled the narratives, with some rhetoric suggesting an existential threat to the *sasana* from Muslims who were alleged to be trying to take over the island and threaten Buddhism to the core.

It should be noted that little credible rationale lay behind this. Some accusations were socio-economically motivated with Muslim traders who have been successful in business often being seen as having advantages or success over Buddhists, prompting some rivalry. Also, the notion of what is termed "love jihad" was invoked in which it was suggested that Muslims were seeking to marry Buddhist women to take over demographically, despite no evidence of any such campaign. The Muslims are a small minority of about ten percent of the population.

It may be noted that the Sri Lankan Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism has been often transferred in many ways to such contexts as Myanmar and Thailand, stoking anti-

Muslim sentiment there. Meanwhile, current tensions in those countries feedback to Sri Lanka.

### **Christian-Muslim Accord**

Importantly, the rhetoric against Christians and Muslims have often seen them seeking common ground against the Buddhist Sinhalese nationalists in Sri Lanka. While it may be too much to speak about a common front, the communal tensions have seen these two communities being closer against threats from the majority Sinhalese society. The recent bomb attacks in Sri Lanka have threatened this situation.

The Sinhalese Buddhists, many of whom we should note reject the extreme Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism of more militant groups, have come with the hand of friendship to the Christians. The Sinhalese may seek to present themselves as the protectors of the Christians and hence drawing a divide of suspicion and mistrust between the Christians and Muslims.

### **Dangers of Inter-Communal Divisions**

For a decade, Sri Lanka has seen relative peace and the recent attacks on churches and major hotels were certainly not expected. It may well be the intention of the attackers to seek to create these fault lines in what are the admittedly somewhat fragile communal ties between Christians and Muslims.

If Muslims in Sri Lanka see themselves as beleaguered and regarded with suspicion by both Buddhists and Christians, then they could become isolated and more amenable to militant discourse. Certainly, they have been subject to Saudi-led Wahhabi influences in recent decades, and some have turned as a result from the more traditional Islam of Sri Lanka to a more militant brand.

It may therefore be an attempt by those involved to open a new field for recruitment and potential conflict, especially given ISIS' territorial losses and its need to give itself credibility and relevance in this situation.

The affiliation of the attackers, while part of a local Wahhabi-influenced group known as the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ), seems credibly linked to ISIS. The reshaping of communal relations could be a result of this influence and is something which those on the ground in Sri Lanka need to ensure does not occur.

The Muslim community seems keen to show their abhorrence of these attacks and it is hoped that they do not become stigmatised as a consequence of them. It may also lead local Muslims to seek the roots of their own traditional Islam amid the influence of hard-liners.

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*Jude Lal Fernando PhD is Assistant Professor in Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin. He brings praxis-based experience to the academic context in the fields of interreligious studies and international peace studies.*

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*Paul Hedges PhD is Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies for the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)