

TERROR NEXT DOOR

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of External State & Non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security incl. Terrorism & illegal Migration

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Sri Lanka's decade of peace after the LTTE's military defeat in May 2009 has been shattered with a diabolical plan to drag the country back into its darkest days. The death toll is nearly 300 from the chain of eight bombings on Easter Sunday targeting churches and hotels across the island nation, worse than anything it has experienced at the hands of the LTTE in the three decades of civil war. The scale and the ferocity of the attack has no precedent in Sri Lanka's troubled history, one from which it believed it had finally emerged. In the last decade, a generation of Sri Lankans has come of age for whom conflict was history, who have no experience of curfews and emergency regulations or the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Now all this is threatening to engulf Sri Lanka again.

According to Sri Lankan authorities, the attacks were carried out by suicide bombers. Two dozen people have been arrested and the government spokesman has named the National Towheed Jamath as the group behind the attacks. Little is known about this organisation except that it preaches a puritanical form of Islam. But it is Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's acknowledgment that the country's security apparatus had "prior information" on the attacks that causes more anguish. The differences between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe appear to have played a good part in the security warning not being taken seriously. The PM has alleged that he was not kept in the loop about the intelligence warnings. If so, the inability of the country's top functionaries to get along has had deadly consequences. It casts their leadership abilities in extremely poor light. However, the administration has done well to prevent any backlash on the Muslim community.

Why now, and why Sri Lanka? Given that investigators believe this was the handiwork of radicalised local Muslims, there have been straws in the wind of such radicalisation for years, as a reaction to attacks by the LTTE on Muslims through the 1990s, and after the war, to the rise of Buddhist fundamentalism that began targeting Muslims. Sri Lanka, where nearly 10 per cent of the 22 million population is Muslim, has also not been insulated from the global spread of Wahabism. Mainstream Muslim parties, major players in Sri Lanka's robust democratic political space, had managed to keep the radicals at bay all these years despite the failure of the political class to repair the ethnic faultlines. The targeting of Christians, who are an even smaller minority in Sri Lanka than Muslims, and in a manner similar to anti-Christian incidents in other parts of the world, also points to more than a local grievance. But it seems too early to say if the Easter bloodbath was the handiwork of ISIS, which would be searching for new spaces to compensate for its total loss of territory. Solving these puzzles will help Sri Lanka, also the rest of South Asia, to craft responses that ensure there will be no repetition of this nightmare.

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