



SRI LANKA

Quick Facts

Population: 22,889,201 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 65,610 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Sinhalese 74.9%, Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%, Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%, Indian Tamil 4.2%, other 0.5% (2012 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$87.35 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a country tragically familiar with ethno-religious conflict, having fought a brutal civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the original pioneers of suicide bombing, for a quarter century between 1983 and 2009. The conflict claimed as many as 100,000 lives before the LTTE, comprising radical members of the country's Hindu Tamil minority, was decimated by a Sri Lankan military offensive in 2009 that also carried a heavy civilian toll. However, until recently the island's Muslim population was largely removed from communal tensions and religious violence and there was little history of violent Islamist groups operating in the country.

The island nation of roughly 25 million citizens off southeastern coast of India is majority Buddhist, with large Hindu, Muslim, and Christian minorities. The religious divide between Buddhist and Hindus largely parallels an ethnic divide between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils more concentrated in the country's north. This has historically been the principal ethno-religious fault line in the nation, and the basis for the aforementioned civil war.

Though a small number of Sri Lankans were found to have traveled to join the Islamic State in the Middle East, Sri Lankan Muslims are considered largely moderate, rejecting more fundamentalist interpretations of Islam with little history of violence or terrorism. Indeed, prior to 2019, there had never been a significant terrorist attack inside Sri Lanka perpetrated by an Islamist group. That changed dramatically on Easter Day, April 21, 2019, when a heinous multi-pronged terrorist attack largely targeting Sri Lanka's Christian minority claimed over 250 lives. It was not only the first terrorist attack since the country's civil war ended in 2009; it was the deadliest terrorist attack in Sri Lankan history—and indeed all of South Asian history.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Until recently, Sri Lanka's Muslim population was largely removed from communal and religious tensions. The country's principal religious divide, between Buddhists and Hindus, largely parallels an ethnic divide between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, who are more concentrated in the north. This ethno-religious fault line was the basis for the quarter-century civil war that ended in 2009 after claiming over 100,000 Sri Lankan lives.¹ Though a small number of Sri Lankans have traveled to join

the Islamic State in the Middle East in recent years, Sri Lankan Muslims are largely moderate, rejecting more fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. However, a multi-pronged terrorist attack largely targeting Sri Lanka's Christian minority claimed over 250 lives on Easter Day 2019, making it the deadliest terror attack in the history of South Asia. It was the first significant terrorist attack perpetrated by an Islamist group on Sri Lankan soil.²

On the morning of Easter Sunday 2019, around 8:30 am, a group of suicide bombers began launching a wave of attacks in Sri Lanka that would eventually claim over 250 lives, including roughly 45 foreign nationals. An additional 500 were injured. The attackers targeted three churches and three hotels frequented by westerners largely in and around the capital, including the Cinnamon Grand, Shangri-La, and Kingsbury hotels as well as St. Anthony's Shrine, St. Sebastian's Church, and the Zion Church. Among the foreigners killed were Americans, British, Dutch, Chinese, Turks and Portuguese citizens.

Eight separate explosions occurred that day, including an initial group of six targeting tourists gathering for breakfast in the hotels and worshippers enjoying morning service for Easter.³ Around 2:00pm, another attacker that failed to detonate his explosives at the Taj Samudra Hotel in Colombo earlier, set off a bomb at the Tropical Inn hotel, killing two.⁴ Fifteen minutes later, Sri Lankan police closed in on an apartment complex housing the pregnant wife of one of the original attackers. She detonated a bomb killing herself, three of her children, and three police officers.⁵

Police initially arrested 21 people in connection with the bombings and in subsequent raids discovered caches of dozens of detonators, pipe bombs, bombmaking materials, and paraphernalia of the Islamic State.⁶ One raid on a suspected hideout weeks later resulted in three suicide bombers detonating their explosives and killing nine of their family members.⁷

The police quickly identified the attackers—all Sri Lankan nationals—as members of the group National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ, or National Monotheism Organization). (The NTJ reportedly “broke away from its parent organization Towheed Jamath in December 2018, when, in a series of incidents, Buddha statues were broken in Mawanella in Kandy district.”)⁸ The original Towheed Jamath had chapters in both Sri Lanka (SLTJ) and the Indian state of Tamil Nadu (TNTJ). The TNTJ, which was founded in 2004 and has multiple offices in Tamil Nadu, condemned the Easter attacks and disavowed the NTJ.⁹ Little is known about the SLTJ, but it had not previously engaged in violent terrorist activities.

The NTJ was previously known to Sri Lankan security services but was deemed a low-level threat with modest capabilities whose “track record had consisted of vandalism against Buddhist statues and low-level communal violence.”¹⁰ An article in the *New York Times* described the NTJ as a “a small but violent group of young Muslims that started at least three years ago in eastern Sri Lanka, far from the country's more cosmopolitan western and southern coasts. Until this month, the group was generally perceived as anti-Buddhist.”¹¹

The Easter Sunday attacks jolted local authorities awake to the active connections between Sri Lankan extremists and international Islamism. For, while all of the attackers had been local members of the NTJ, experts concurred that it was highly likely the group had been aided – or at the very least inspired – by other international Islamist groups.¹² According to one analysis, “The Sri Lanka blasts were both sophisticated and well-coordinated, making it very likely that the attackers received some sort of training and assistance from ISIS.”¹³ Similarly, Sri Lankan Health Minister Rajitha Senarathne declared, “There was an international network without which these attacks could not have succeeded.”¹⁴

Moreover, many of the bombers were believed to have been radicalized while traveling abroad. At least one had attempted, unsuccessfully, to travel to Syria to join the Islamic State.¹⁵ Sri Lanka's army chief told Reuters that several had additionally traveled to multiple sites in India, including Bengaluru, Kashmir, and Kerala, for training and indoctrination.¹⁶ And at least one Syrian national was detained in Sri Lanka after the attacks, while a video issued by the Islamic State claimed responsibility.¹⁷

That appears to be part of a larger trend. A number of Sri Lankan nationals are known to have traveled

to the Middle East to join the Islamist State. In November 2016, Sri Lanka's justice minister stated 32 Sri Lankan Muslims had by then joined the Islamic State.¹⁸ A subsequent 2019 analysis by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization estimated that about three dozen Sri Lankans and about 75 Indians had succeeded in traveling to the Middle East and linking up with the group in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹ A concurrent report from the Jamestown Foundation claims about 50 Sri Lankan citizens had traveled to Syria to join ISIS, which had succeeded in building a "burgeoning covert network inside the country since 2015."²⁰ Some NTJ followers are known to have operated pro-IS accounts on social media.²¹

As the tragic event of Easter 2019 demonstrate, Sri Lanka is not immune from the scourge of Islamist terrorism. While tensions between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils still represent the country's sharpest religious and ethnic fault line, radical Islamist groups have demonstrated the capacity to launch destructive, large-scale terrorist attacks, presenting a new challenge to Sri Lankan security forces with little experience in dealing with transnational terrorism. For now, at least, it seems more likely the Easter Sunday attack will prove the exception, rather than the opening salvo in a new wave of Islamist terrorism in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan security forces are now much more attuned to the threat, and work more closely with their Indian counterparts. However, the prospect of foreign fighters returning to Sri Lanka from other conflict zones and launching additional attacks cannot be dismissed.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Sri Lanka has experienced a particularly traumatic and violent history of conflict as a result of its religious and ethnic divides. According to its 2012 census, of Sri Lanka's roughly 22 million citizens, roughly 70% are Buddhist, 12.6% are Hindu, 9.7% are Muslim and 7.6% are Christian. Historically, the principal fault line in the country has been between the Buddhist majority, most of which are ethnically Sinhalese, and the Hindu minority, most of which are ethnically Tamil. This divide was at the heart of the Sri Lankan civil war that lasted for 25 years between 1983 and 2009.

What's more, to the degree Sri Lanka's Muslim community has been involved in communal friction it has traditionally been not with the Christian minority but the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, and to a lesser degree the Hindu Tamil minority. There have been periodic bouts of violence between the two communities, with Buddhist nationalist groups like the *Bodu Bala Sena* openly antagonistic toward Muslims. As Bloomberg notes, the "most recent flare up was in March 2018 in Kandy and was widely viewed as fueled by Facebook posts that urged deadly violence against Muslims."²²

Whereas Muslims have been faced friction with the Buddhist and, to a lesser degree, Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, Christians, which span the ethnic divide, were largely spared from communal tensions, and have mostly lived at peace with the other three communities. As Nirupama Subramanian notes,²³ even "the LTTE was always cautious not to offend the Catholic church, which was sympathetic to its cause. Many Tamils in the north-east are Christian and lived peacefully in LTTE-controlled areas alongside their Hindu brethren, unlike the Muslims, who were evicted by the Tigers in 1990."

Sri Lankan Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni, and most follow the more mystical and moderate Sufi traditions. Since the late 1970s, more fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, including the *Wahhabism* of Saudi Arabia, began appearing in Sri Lanka. Students who traveled to Saudi Arabia to study returned with more extremist ideas and Wahhabi-linked groups were known to have violently attacked more moderate Sufi Muslims in Sri Lanka in the mid 2000s.²⁴ In 2012, the country expelled nearly 160 members of the Tabligh Jamaat who had come on tourist visas to preach.²⁵

Overall, however, Sri Lanka's Muslim community has largely condemned more extremist elements like the NTJ. Groups like the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka have denounced extremist ideologies and other moderate groups have issued statements "urging the government to ban the Towheed Jamaat saying that 'this movement has fast become cancer within Muslim community in Sri Lanka, preaching and practicing

religious intolerance.”²⁶

Ultimately, the attackers’ motives remain unclear. The NTJ was known to have clashed with Buddhist groups in the past, but not Christian ones. There was some speculation in Sri Lanka, voiced by the country’s defense minister, that the attacks were a response to a shooting rampage in New Zealand targeting two mosques that had unfolded a month prior. However, most experts believe the planning for the attacks would have had to have begun months prior.

In the aftermath of the attacks, Sri Lankan Muslims were targeted by other ethnic communities. In one spate of violence in May 2019, “Sinhala [Buddhist] mobs rampaged through at least 24 towns in western Sri Lanka, looting and attacking Muslim properties with stones, swords and petrol bombs.” Some 14 Muslims were reportedly wounded and the mob “destroyed over 540 Muslim-owned houses, shoppes, and mosques as well as nearly 100 vehicles.”²⁷ In June 2019, a group of influential Buddhist monks called for a boycott of Muslim business and endorsed the idea of stoning Muslim “traitors.”²⁸ No major cases of Muslim/Buddhist violence or tensions have been reported since.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The Easter Day attack was the product of a colossal intelligence failure on the part of Sri Lanka’s security services. On April 11, ten days prior to the attack, Sri Lankan police chief Pujuth Jayasundara issued an alert warning: “A foreign intelligence agency has reported that the NTJ (National Thowheeth Jama’ath) is planning to carry out suicide attacks targeting prominent churches as well as the Indian high commission in Colombo.”²⁹

As early as April 4, he had been provided specific information from what is believed to be India’s intelligence services about the NTJ and their intention to target churches and hotels. India reportedly obtained the information from a recruit of the Islamic State held in Indian custody, and repeated its warning the day prior to the attack.³⁰

Based on this information, Cabinet Minister Harin Fernando also circulated an internal security memo prior to the attack warning NTJ was “getting ready for suicide attacks on popular Catholic churches and the Indian High Commission” and “inciting hatred” among followers. What’s more, “weeks before the Easter attack, [Sri Lankan security services] found detonators, explosives and other clear indicators that attacks were being planned.”³¹

In the aftermath of the attack, the chief of national intelligence, defense secretary, and inspector general of police resigned and the latter two were subsequently arrested.³²

Four Muslim cabinet ministers, five Muslim junior ministers, and two Muslim provincial governors also resigned in June 2019. They were under pressure to do so from an influential Buddhist monk who accused three of the 11 officials of sponsoring the Easter Day terror attack. He threatened to fast himself to death unless the government removed all three.³³ Two of the nine ministers returned to government service shortly afterward.³⁴

By one count, the Sri Lankan security services arrested a total of 2,300 people in the weeks after the attack, a majority of them Muslims. The government also banned three Islamist groups, including the NTJ, the Jamaathe Millathe Ibrahim (JMI) and Willayath As Seylani (WAS).³⁵

After the attacks the government unveiled a series of new laws and measures designed to curb Islamist radicalism, including:

- A ban on the burqa/niqab and other face coverings.
- A new draft bill designed to criminalize “false news” punishable by a large monetary fine or up to five years in prison.
- A mandate that religious sermons in mosques be submitted to the Ministry of Muslim

Religious and Cultural Affairs.

- An effort to streamline intelligence collection, storage, and sharing.
- A provision calling for the removal of the Arabic language from signage.
- An amendment to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act mandating a minimum age of 18.
- A review of textbooks that may encourage radicalization.
- A ban on a television channel, “Peace TV,” believed to promote Islamist radical ideas.

In August 2019, the emergency regulations lapsed, although in early 2020, the Sri Lankan parliament published a report recommending legislation that would ban the burqa.³⁶

While it does not offer a legal framework for dealing with members of foreign terrorist groups,³⁷ Sri Lanka does have a *Prevention of Terrorism Act* dating back to 1978 that was used largely against domestic threats during the civil war against the LTTE. It has been heavily criticized inside and outside Sri Lanka as a mechanism that was abused by government to suppress human rights, crush political opposition and dissent, and promote unlawful detentions.

In 2018, the Sri Lankan government began floating a draft of a new *Counter Terrorism Act*. According to Human Rights Watch, the bill addresses previous criticism of the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* (PTA) insofar as it “narrows definitions of terrorism acts, strengthens protections against custodial torture and coerced confessions, reduces pre-charge and pre-trial detention periods, and increases access by suspects to legal counsel and family members.”³⁸

The aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks has seen a marked uptick in the Sri Lankan government’s counterterrorism efforts – and its global engagement on the subject. In June 2019, the Sri Lankan government welcomed the UN Assistant Secretary General and Executive Director of the UN’s Counter Terrorism Directorate to discuss counterterrorism measures, including border management, radicalism in social media, and terrorist financing.³⁹ In July 2019, the Sri Lankan government held a counterterrorism dialogue with representatives from the European Union (EU). The EU offered a roughly \$10 million aid package to bolster Sri Lanka’s counterterrorism, law enforcement, rehabilitation, and counter-radicalization efforts.⁴⁰

In November 2019, Sri Lankans elected Gotabaya Rajapaksa as their next president. The former defense minister and brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa was propelled to victory largely by the country’s Buddhist Sinhala majority. Rajapaksa campaigned on a national security platform but largely avoided using divisive communal rhetoric targeting Muslims during the election campaign and since assuming the presidency. Nevertheless, Sri Lankan Muslim organizations have expressed concerns about his association to Buddhist nationalist groups and his hardline policies while prosecuting the war against the LTTE.⁴¹

President Rajapaksa traveled to India in November 2019 in his first trip abroad. In New Delhi, Rajapaksa secured a \$50 million special line of credit designed to boost Sri Lanka’s counterterrorism and intelligence capabilities. The funds will reportedly be used for counterterrorism training for Sri Lankan police officers and bomb disposal programs, among other things.⁴²

Subsequently, in early 2020, President Rajapaksa decided to withdraw a proposal to repeal the controversial PTA and replace it with a new counterterrorism act. This earned Rajapaksa a rebuke from the European Union, which noted that Sri Lanka had pledged to repeal the PTA as part of an agreement to earn favorable trade access under the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP+).⁴³ The EU could theoretically remove Sri Lanka from the GSP+ program, as it has before, which would affect the 58% of Sri Lanka’s exports to the EU that benefit from the GSP+ program.

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