

The Bloody Easter Sunday Terrorist Attack in Sri Lanka: What Went Wrong?

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Abstract: The sensational terrorist attack across Sri Lanka on the Easter Sunday in 2019 is one of the deadliest attacks in the post 9/11 era. The event unfolded as a real shock for the Sri Lankan authorities but many see this as a classical example of intelligence failure and a result of political polarization within the country. Whatever the reason was, the attack has sent a shock wave across the whole South Asian region and once again accentuated the loopholes in the national and regional security architecture of this sub-continent. The involvement of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in this infamous terrorist attack exhibits the globalization of terrorism at national, regional and international level. This paper endeavors to unearth the reasons leading to this deleterious terrorist attack and then it provides a picture of trailing impacts on Sri Lankan economic and security environment.

Keywords: Terrorism, the Easter Sunday Attack, ISIS, Intelligence failure, security.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On 21 April 2019, the day of Easter Sunday, Sri Lanka experienced a series of unprecedented events when terrorists launch suicide attacks in three churches and three luxurious hotels. Never in its recent history the island nation encountered such a coordinated terrorist attacks that came as a real surprise for the Maithripala Sirisena administration and for the law enforcing agencies. In fact, it is one of the deadliest terrorist attacks since the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States as 253 people lost their lives and more than 500 got injured.¹ Initially, it was believed that National Thawheed Jamaat (NTJ), a home-grown Islamist terrorist organization, was behind the attack. Later, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility for this notorious terrorist attack. Intelligence and security experts outside Sri Lanka see this as a typical case of intelligence lapse. Sri Lankan intelligence agencies received information from Indian and Australian intelligence agencies about potential terrorist attacks on the Easter Sunday.² In addition to this, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was totally unaware about the intelligence provided by the other intelligence agencies. In fact, a rift has been existing between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe since 2018. Due to that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, more often than not, has been absent in security related meetings. Even on the day of attack, while the President was on a foreign trip, Prime Minister called for an emergency security council meeting but its members failed to show up.³ Again, the government in the aftermath of the attack have been constantly denying the involvement any international terrorist network and trying to blame home-grown terrorist organizations. Actually, the Easter Sunday terrorist attack is a prime example of globalization of terrorism in South Asia. Most of the perpetrators in this attack, officially claimed by the ISIS, are actually from affluent and educated family background. Among the eight attackers, one them were a female terrorist named Fatima Ibrahim who killed herself, her unborn child and her three sons during the suicide attack.⁴ The Easter Sunday terrorist attack has created far reaching impacts on Sri Lankan economy, politics and society as a whole. After overcoming its decade long civil war against the Tamils, the Sri Lankan society is now facing a new challenge that may quite easily disrupt the trajectory of a peaceful and developing Sri Lankan society.

II. A CASE OF INTELLIGENCE FAILURE

Intelligence failure has been one of the defining features of the South Asian security architecture. The Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008, the Bin Laden killing in 2011, the Holey Artisan attack in 2016 represent intelligence failure at various levels. The Easter Sunday bombing is a new entry to the long list of intelligence failure in South Asia. Before analyzing intelligence lapse in the Easter Sunday attack, it is imperative to discuss the intelligence cycle. Intelligence is a very broad term to define as suggested by Thomas E. Copeland. According to Copeland, intelligence failure covers failures of communication, of bureaucratic structure and

behavior, of estimation and analysis, of warning, of policy, or of judgment.⁵ First of all, one needs to focus on intelligence cycle to have a better understanding on how intelligence works.

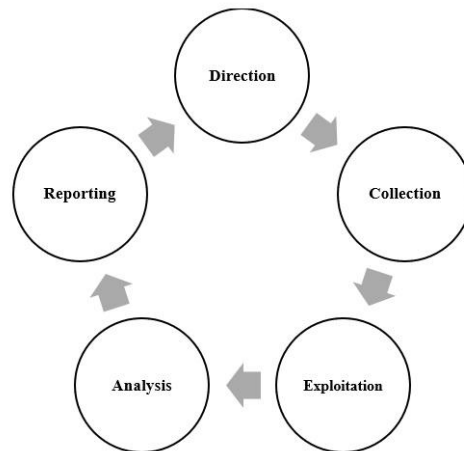


Figure 1: The Intelligence Cycle⁶

The cycle demonstrates that after getting necessary and sufficient direction from the higher or decision-making authority the intelligence agencies start collecting information on the given subject. This collection process must be guided by the explicit direction and communication. After collecting required information, it must be sorted, collated and filtered. Once the process is done, the heart of whole intelligence cycle starts in form of analysis. The success of this stage heavily depends on the analytical ability, knowledge and experience of the analyst. A successful analysis process would result in a well-prepared report for action and strategy.⁷ Now, any lapse or shortcoming at any stage of this aforementioned intelligence cycle would result in an intelligence debacle. Ashraf & Sarker uses Loch K. Johnson's theory to explain intelligence failure. There are four types of intelligence failure- planning and direction failure, collection and processing failure, analytical failure and dissemination failure.⁸ In case of the Easter Sunday terrorist attack, after primary examination, analytical and dissemination failure seem to be the prime reasons for intelligence failure. As mentioned earlier, President Sirisena did not share any piece of information with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. In addition to this, there was no coordination between the Prime Minister and the law enforcing agencies. Therefore, the necessary information was not disseminated through the proper channel. Again, negligence from the part of defence forces contributed to this deadly terrorist attack. On 2 July 2019, the police commander and former defence chief Pujith Jayasundara as well as former defence secretary Hemasiri Fernando were arrested over alleged failure and negligence in preventing the terrorist attacks. Attorney General Dappula de Livera, the chief state prosecutor, said that these two individuals committed 'criminal negligence' that should not go unpunished.⁹

In hindsight, this terrorist attack has exposed the vulnerability and limitations of law enforcing agencies in Sri Lanka in countering terrorism. This unexpected and unprecedented attack should be an alarming sign for the security architecture in this Indian Ocean state. If one closely looks at the unfolding of events on 21 July, six simultaneous suicide attacks took place in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa in a span of 20 minutes. These attacks took place in the shrine of St. Anthony Church (Colombo), the Kingsbury hotel (Colombo), the St. Sebastian's Church (Negombo), the Shangri-La Hotel (Colombo), the Cinnamon Grand Hotel (Colombo) and the Zion Church (Batticaloa) respectively. Even after that the police and rest of the law enforcing agencies could not stop other two attacks that took place later that day in the Tropical Inn Guesthouse (Colombo) and the Dematagoda Housing Complex (Colombo suburb).¹⁰ Moreover, the authority could not realize the active collaboration of international terrorist networks, like the ISIS, with local Islamist terrorist organizations. Recent terrorist trends elsewhere in the world show that rich and educated people are joining the ranks of infamous international and regional terrorist networks. The Easter attack is no exception to this trend. Siegfried O. Wolf, a South Asian expert at the Brussel-based South Asian Democratic Forum, states that although there is not much information about NTJ but it looks similar to other terrorist organizations active in South Asia, such as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) in Bangladesh and is inspired by Al-Qaeda.¹¹ After analyzing the profile of all eight perpetrators in this attack one can easily conclude that poverty or grievance are not the catalyst for these terrorists to join the ISIS. Inshaf Ibrahim and Ilham Ibrahim were the two brothers among the eight suicide terrorists. Their father, Mohammad Yusuf Ibrahim, is one of the successful businessmen in the Muslim community of the island state. Inshaf and Ilham were both involved in jewelry business. Inshaf's wife, Fatima Ibrahim, was also involved in the attack and killed herself in the process. Another terrorist in this attack,

Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed, had studied aerospace engineering at Kingston University and later moved to Australia to continue his study.¹² If one compares these attackers' profile with that of the terrorists at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Bangladesh in 2016, then a new pattern is clearly visible in terms of the recruitment in terrorists organizations. Incorporation of female terrorists in the ranks of terrorist organizations is another pattern to be reckoned. Although the Prime Minister Wickremesinghe described the profiles of terrorists as a total surprise, any serious student of South Asian terrorism study would not find this pattern as unfamiliar or exotic. Therefore, it would not be imprecise to say that this terrorist attack on the Easter came as a real surprise package for the leadership as well as for the law enforcing agencies in Sri Lanka.

III. AFTERMATH OF THE ATTACK

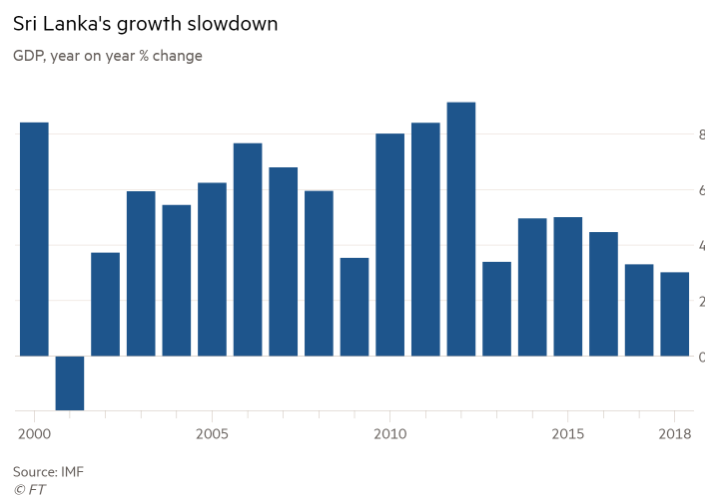
In the long history of violence and bloodshed Sri Lanka had never experienced such surprising terrorist attack that dismantled the intelligence and security architecture as well as social fabric. The Easter attack has created far reaching impact on the political, economic, security and societal landscape in Sri Lanka. In addition to this, the minority Sri Lankan Muslim community is under serious strain from multifarious corners. The government instigated immediate blockade on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, Instagram, Snap Chat, YouTube, Twitter, Skype and many more to stop the free flow of misinformation and rumors. It was a desperate attempt to control the immediate damage. The subsequent paragraphs will shed light on the repercussions of the Easter bombings.

After the attack, the political rift between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has been exposed more than before. Tension between the two top political leaders of Sri Lanka reached its vertex in October 2018 when President Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and replaced him with former President Mahendra Rajapaksa. Quite interestingly, it was the Sirisena and Wickremesinghe coalition that defeated President Rajapaksa in 2015 election. In December 2018, the Supreme Court declared the ejection of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe illegal and reinstated him in his former post. But since then Mr. Wickremesinghe has been kept aloof from all important meetings and councils related to the security and intelligence. Therefore, the attack was a total 'surprise' for the Prime Minister who had no prior information or knowledge about the attack. In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Mr. Wickremesinghe said that he was 'out of the loop' when it came to intelligence warning ahead of the deadly terrorist attack.¹³ Given the activity of terrorist networks and the vulnerability of security apparatus such lack of coordination and communication gap can prove to be seriously hazardous in the future.

The prime target in the aftermath of the attack has turned out to be the minority Muslim community living in diverse areas across Sri Lanka. International media reported serious violation of human rights against the minority Muslim community by the law enforcing agencies and Buddhist extremist. On April 29, a week after the Easter attack, government banned Burka or full face covering in public spheres. In an incident, police arrested a pregnant lady simply because she covered her face as she was feeling nausea. Abdul Raheem Masaheena was detained under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) for wearing a dress with what the police mistook as *dharmachakraya* (a Buddhist symbol) embroidered on it. Lawyer Swasthika Arulingam reported that a Muslim activist was arrested because he was writing, on social media, against ISIS in Tamil and the police thought he was writing in support of ISIS because they could not read Tamil language.¹⁴ Police had conducted indiscriminate arrest after the attack. The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka reported that members of certain regional Bar Associations have refused to appear on behalf of the Muslim community arrested members after the Easter attack. Public premises and building have been banned for Muslim community members. Special search operations have been conducted only against the Muslims in major cities and suburbs.¹⁵ Sufferings of the minority Muslims in the non-Muslim Sri Lankan society have been in the record books of human rights activists and organization for quite a long time. Different Buddhist extremist groups have been using social media and public platforms to portray Muslims as demographic and economic threats to the integrity of the Sinhalese community. To make the situation even erratic, in the post Easter attack weeks, Buddhist extremists claimed that a Muslim doctor, Shegu Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi, have sterilized more than 4,000 Sinhalese women during their medical treatment. The news came in the front pages of national dailies in May and did not hesitate to arrest him immediately. Although the magistrate court granted him a bail of 2.75 million rupees (\$15,600), the Buddhist monks and other local residents demanded further detention of Mr. Shafi.¹⁶ In the era of social media and instant messaging system, it is quite easy to spread misinformation and conspiracy theory to the common people and curb their support towards a particular group or party. In 2013, violence against Muslim-owned businesses, like Fashion Bug, were spurred on by rumors that Muslims were selling Sinhalese women underwear laced with sterilization cream. A similar rumor reappeared again in 2018 creating further agitation between minority Muslims and majority Sinhalese. In the same year, another hearsay circulated on Facebook claiming that 23,000 sterilization pills had been seized from a pharmacy ran by a Muslim. Some exasperated Sinhalese individuals beat the store owner and set fire to a nearby mosque.¹⁷ All these aforementioned discrete incidents indicate a common propaganda against the

Muslims. The propaganda suggests that Muslims are trying to change the demography within different parts of Sri Lanka and try to neutralize the domination of majority Sinhalese as well as increase the influence of Muslims.

Besides the communal rift and tension, the Easter attack hit the island nation hard and caused some serious damage to the economic fabric. Out of all other economic sectors in Sri Lanka, tourism had to absorb the most immediate shock of the attack. Tourism accounts for 5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the government have predicted a 30% decrease in overall tourism between 2019 and 2020.¹⁸ But reality shows an even more grim picture. Occupancy rates in hotels has already been reduced up to 50% and many a hotel are about to be closed due to zero tourists in major tourist attractions. Besides the hotel business, small business and individual enterprises like tuk-tuk drivers, guides, souvenir and food sellers have been suffering immense financial strain.¹⁹ Sri Lanka had accepted a \$1.5bn International Monetary Fund (IMF) restructuring program in mid-2016 to bring its economy on track. Figure 2 shows the downfall of Sri Lankan economy since 2012.²⁰ Therefore, a daunting task is at hand of the Sirisena administration for the remaining days and it would be an even formidable challenge for the upcoming government as the country is bracing itself for the national election later this year.



IV. TRANSNATIONAL TERRORIST NETWORKS IN SRI LANKA

Zahran Hashim, the mastermind behind the Easter Sunday terrorist attack, was a radical Islamist preacher from eastern coast region of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka and one of the suicide bombers of the attack. Before the onslaught, the law enforcing and intelligence agencies had no idea about Hashim. Before the attack he was the top leader of NTJ in Sri Lanka and seen in a video footage, released later by ISIS, pledging his allegiance along with other perpetrators to Islamic State chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Few years back he was a mere Islamic cleric with little or no followers. Later, he started to recruit followers through online radicalization and his activities did not go unnoticed within the Muslim community. The local authority was informed about the suspicious activities of Hashim but they undermined him to be too little to do any real damage.²¹ The picture of Zahran Hashim along with his followers in a background covered with ISIS flag is quite similar to that of a picture appeared on internet three years back when the neighboring Bangladesh suffered one of the shocking terrorist attacks in its recent history. Even more, the family background and economic status resemble remarkable equivalence. All of them are coming from affluent and financially solvent family background with an everlasting frustration regarding their life and society. Amarasingam claims that the earliest Tawheed organizations in Sri Lanka, mainly Salafi in outlook, started its journey in mid the 1950s.²² Like other South Asian nations, funding of these organizations was coming from oil soaked Arab states, especially from Saudi Arabia and others. The funding was utilized by establishing madrasahs and similar institutions in many parts of the country. After finishing his theological studies at Jamiathul Falah Arabic College in Kattankudy, Zahran along with others established Darul Athar in 2007. Getting ban from Darul Athar, due to contrasting belief and interpretation, Zahran founded NTJ in 2012. In the very beginning, NTJ started to preach Islamic knowledge, values and social work. For some unclear reasons, since 2016 Zahran's ideas started to become more extreme. He talked more about jihad, violence, suicide bombings and support for Islamic State in his speeches on social media platforms. A riot broke out between the Sufi and Salafi Muslims in March 2017 that forced Zahran and his brother to go undercover for a while. Since then he continuously posted videos online urging the destruction of non-Muslims and law enforcing authorities in Sri Lanka. But the law enforcing and intelligence agencies never took his warnings seriously.²³

President Sirisena along with other officials denied any connection of ISIS in relations to the Easter attack. But there is no denying the fact that some of the perpetrators of this attack had direct connection or had taken trainings from ISIS wings. The success of the tremendously coordinated attack resembles the sings of ISIS involvement. As the state led investigation is going at the time of writing (August 2019), it would be interesting to hear from the government once the investigation process is finished. The Indian National Investigation Agency (NIA) have founded connection between Zahran and other Islamist extremist groups in India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. NIA also reported that some Muslim youth from Kerala and Tamil Nadu started to disappear and their family members feared that they were on their way to join the ranks of ISIS.²⁴ Actually, this pattern of disappearance in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the Holey Artisan attack. Many parents reported to Police that their children went missing. Not only youths, radicalized professionals and educated people also disappeared. Aadil Ameer, a 24-year-old software engineer, is suspected to have link with NTJ and the Jamatheh Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) and provided technical as well as logistic support to the Easter attack. Inshaf and Ilham were the active members of the latter organization.²⁵ For now, it is quite certain that ISIS had some degree of involvement in the Easter terrorist attack. Denial of ISIS's involvement from the government's part is not surprising at all. It's a common response, specially in South Asia, from the host governments to deny international terrorist connection and blame local terrorist outposts in order to avoid intensive international focus and pressure.

V. CONCLUSION

The Easter Sunday terrorist attack, without doubt, is one of the bloodiest events in the recent history of Sri Lanka. The gash of 25 years prolonged civil war is still very much alive in the Lankan society. Progress achieved in the post-civil war era has been shattered into pieces due to this notorious terrorist attack. Economic, social, political and security fabric have been seriously hampered. To add further complexities, anti-Muslim propaganda is one the rise in Sri Lanka provided that all the perpetrators in the Easter attack were Muslims. As a consequence, minority Muslim communities living in many parts of the country are becoming victims of hate speech and hate crime. Even the law enforcing agencies are carrying out scourge against Muslims. Being the oldest democracy in South Asia, such ill treatment of minority population is impairing the image of Sri Lanka as a multi ethnic democratic state. It is imperative for Sri Lanka now to get over the differences and launch faith-based dialogue between ethno-religious groups to minimize the inter religious gaps. Izzuddin & Attanayake suggest that to get the Muslims on their side, the Sri Lankan government must protect the minority Muslim community from Islamophobic backlashes and prevent the recurrence of any anti-Muslim riots.²⁶ Fighting transnational terrorism is not a sole responsibility or liability of Sri Lanka. Most of the South Asian countries have been affected by the transnational terrorist networks in the past. A coalition in South Asia, consist of all South Asian states, can be good starting point to fight transnational and international terrorist networks. Such coalition would serve two purposes. First, it would provide a common platform for South Asian states to work together against common enemies, transnational terrorist networks, and overcome bilateral differences for collective goals. Second, it would pave the way for establishing a concrete and effective regional security mechanisms to tackle down multifarious security threats. On 9 June 2019, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka on his way back from Maldives and expressed his firm commitment in fighting terrorism and radicalization collectively in the region. Such commitment from Narendra Modi along with Sirisena can usher new horizon for regional cooperation among South Asian states to counter terrorism.

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