A Wrong Kind of Resurrection

Sri Lanka Bomb Attacks

The ghastly serial bomb blasts on churches and hotels on Easter Sunday that killed more than 200 people and injured hundreds more in Sri Lanka have revived the ghosts of ethnic hatred, which tore the island country apart in earlier decades. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, expectations of normalcy through peace and reconciliation have faltered amid a resurgence of social polarisation and manipulation of cultural identities.

The latest attacks come amid a bloody milestone in a post-war trajectory that went horribly wrong. Terrorism festered in divided societies by exploiting grievances and anxieties of groups that feel they are being victimised. Yesterday’s eight separate bomb blasts were carried out in a social landscape that certainly fits that bill.

After vanquishing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, Sri Lanka’s majority Buddhist Sinhalese elite did not opt to reach out and heal the wounds, and regain the trust of minority Tamils and Muslims, who comprise 13% and 10%, respectively, of the total population. Justice for wartime atrocities remains a bitter unfulfilled aspiration.

Rabble-rousing Sinhalese politicians and hardline Buddhist clerics whipped up a frenzy about Muslims and Christians posing an existential threat to the country’s demographic make-up and majoritarian value system. The ruling establishment always sought an enemy in the form of a dehumanised ‘Other’ to win elections and maintain economic privileges.

Once, the Tamils – the majority of whom are Hindus – had been ‘pacified’ by pulverising the LTTE, Sinhalese ethnic entrepreneurs turned their attention to Muslims and Christians. Repeated mob attacks and riots against Muslims and Christians, spurred by Buddhist chauvinistic organisations like the Bodu Bala Sena, became “normalised”, as if they were the natural outcome and right of the ‘winners’ of the civil war.

It is in this context that radicalisation of Sri Lanka’s Muslims, who reside in the capital Colombo and in the eastern and western coastal districts, increased. In 2016, the Sri Lankan government revealed that 33 Sri Lankan Muslims “from the families which are considered as well-educated and elite” had joined the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. A hitherto unknown outfit called National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) came to notice amid talk of revenge for hate crimes suffered by Sri Lankan Muslims at the hands of Buddhist mobs.

Examples of similar atrocities occurring in Buddhist-majority Myanmar also fired up these elements. They even got tacit backing of some mainstream Sri Lankan Muslim politicians eager to carve out their own minority turfs.

The scale of the Easter Sunday attacks was such that only an organised and equipped terrorist group with foreign links could have plotted them – and achieved so much carnage. Sri Lanka’s law enforcement and counter-terrorism units, which had grown complacent after the civil war concluded, have obviously failed, and will need to get their acts together to avert future disasters like this.

But the broader political flaws of the post-war settlement, which form the backdrop to the terrorist problem, are the hardest to fix. Tamils – Christians among them – lost their lives in Sri Lanka’s eastern region – remain disillusioned by the ‘peace of the graveyard’ and the ‘victor’s justice’ meted to them after LTTE’s defeat. Muslims, who had once upon a time been brutalised and ethnically cleansed during the civil war, continue to target violence. Sinhalese extremists, like Sri Lanka’s Easter Sunday attackers.

The busting of the devolution camp – with the 100kg of explosives stored in the parliament attack – in January by Sri Lankan authorities in Puttalam district – was for the country’s co-existence.

Obviously, not all Sinhalese Buddhists are bigoted. But the proportion of politicians and people who are still demonising, not gone away. In the face of talk of an impending upheaval, a great many people are coming to the realisation that a once-fertile ground has not been abandoned to ethnic practices.

Sri Lanka needs to return to the three communities – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims – and forge a cultural mosaic that interconnects communities. The nation, which needs a new political leadership, is as important as the political part.

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