

Sri Lanka: Fighting for the Soul of Islam - How violent ideology has taken hold in my community?

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After the Easter bombings, I am struggling to understand how violent ideology has taken hold in my Muslim community.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Two days after the Easter Sunday bomb attacks in Sri Lanka, I met my greengrocer at the Colpetty market, a symbol of the cosmopolitan city that I call home. I have known Ashraff virtually all my life. He did not have his usual half-smile on his face, and when I went up to him to say goodbye, I could see he was troubled.

Eventually, shaking his head in sorrow, with tears in his eyes, he told me that the day before, someone he had known for 35 years, a man from Sri Lanka's Sinhala majority, had said he could no longer be his friend. I understood his sorrow. The attacks on Easter Sunday have left everyone in Sri Lanka confused and bewildered. Those of us who are Muslim are also trying to understand how this violence could have come from our own community.

In the hours and days after the attacks, I sent text messages to my Christian friends, apologizing for what the attackers had done. Even though these terrorists were as far away from me in ideology as anyone could be, I felt shame. My friends responded, in true Christian spirit, that I had no need to apologize, and sent messages of concern for my safety.

Part of my dismay comes from realizing how far removed parts of the Muslim community have become from the rest of our country. Sri Lankan Muslims trace our roots back to the Arab traders and Sufi mystics who brought Islam to Sri Lanka in the seventh century. The traders brought commerce and married local women; the Sufis came on pilgrimage to Adam's Peak, which they believe is marked by Adam's footprint.

Mine is a typical Muslim family: we mix with everyone in this multiethnic, multilingual country. And I wear both Western and Sri Lankan clothes, as do my mother, sister and extended family. None of us choose to wear the hijab; we believe that our faith is in our hearts rather than in our clothing.

Over the past 30-odd years, an insidious change occurred in our community. It's hard to pinpoint when. It might have been when Sri Lanka began sending droves of housemaids to the Middle East in the early 1980s, among them many Muslim women. Many of these women had adopted the abaya and hijab in their countries of employment and, on their return, continued wearing them in Sri Lanka. Initially, they were the most vociferous that Sri Lankan Muslims were practicing a diluted version of Islam, that their prayers were not said in the correct Arabic accent, that they should stop praising the Prophet Muhammad and saints, and that they were not dressed properly according to Islamic guidelines — especially the women.

This strict interpretation of Islam began to take hold. I noticed it the first time a Muslim man refused

to shake my hand, and when Muslims began to sprinkle their conversations with religious Arabic phrases. Young Muslim men I knew from the city began going to rural areas to preach on how to practice their faith better. Muslim weddings began to be held in male-only mosques, without the presence of the bride, instead of at home or in hotels. The most visible change was that Muslim women stopped wearing their traditional sari or shalwar kameez in favor of the hijab, abaya or niqab. Muslim men soon followed suit. Robes replaced sarongs or trousers, and more of them sported beards.

Today, Sufism has gone underground, while radical Wahhabis and Salafis have taken over many of Sri Lanka's mosques. Saudi-funded religious schools with puritanical preachers have persuaded many in our community that Sufism is a threat to the practice of a "pure," original Islam. While some families still cling to their Sufi roots, others have found it easier to accept the Wahhabi-enforced norms, which have affected Muslims regardless of class, city or sect.

Being a conservative Muslim, of course, does not mean being a violent extremist. But for a few Sri Lankan Muslims, it was a small step from conservatism to the hate-filled ideology of the Islamic State. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Tuesday that at least one of the bombers had trained with the group in Syria. Earlier reports about the suspected bombers indicate some came from wealthy families and were educated in England or Australia.

Ironically, as conservative Muslims became more insular, moderate and liberal Muslims like me are left at the front line of confrontations. My own friends have asked me to explain how our previously well-integrated Muslim community seems to have transformed overnight into an alien population.

And as Muslims became more visible in Sri Lanka, they have become targets of violence. Over the last several years, an extremist Buddhist group, the Bodhu Bala Sena (or Buddhist Power Army), has begun to preach against the Muslim community, exhorting followers to boycott Muslim businesses and spreading virulent lies about Muslims on social media. These groups and their followers have been linked to violence against Muslims in the south and center of Sri Lanka last year.

Amid all these warning signs, successive governments in Sri Lanka have done nothing. The government's floundering and incompetence in handling the recent alerts about the Easter attacks have been widely reported. The planning, scale and precision of the attacks reflect months, if not years, of preparation and a slow, deep process of radicalization that Sri Lanka has ignored.

Before the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009, radicalization on the east coast of Sri Lanka may even have been encouraged by governments that believed they could use it to their advantage in the much larger push to defeat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. They gave visas to extremist foreign preachers to spread their ideology, and allowed religious schools to be built without adequate oversight of the curriculum. The governments seemed unaware they had caught another tiger by the tail. And some Muslim leaders have used this radicalization to ensure they would stay in power.

A few people committed an act of treachery that left our country in shreds and our community in limbo, and in the end, the blame lies with them. But too many of us were unaware of how deeply the rot had set in. How did a community that was part of the fabric of the country tear itself away?

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P.S.

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/opinion/sri-lanka-bombing.html>
- Ameena Hussein, a novelist, is the author of a forthcoming nonfiction book about Ibn Battuta in Sri Lanka.