

Sri Lanka: Fight Against Extremism Should Not Be Confused With Islamophobia

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"Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world.

By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law." -Dhammapada

What happened on Easter Sunday is unforgivable and our rage and condemnation is beyond imagination. The nation should be complimented for their patience and maturity and the civilized way, they conducted themselves without allowing their baser instincts to take control over their rational thinking. Both Cardinal and Army Commander spoke in a balanced manner looking beyond the terror movement of the barbarians who carried out these dastardly attacks, while the politicians and social media warriors have been as usual in competition, to spread hatred and anti-Muslim venom using this massacre as a pretext. For the hate lobbies, the maturity of the people to observe constraint in the face of provocations was seen as a weakness. We have seen in this massacre, the worst that human beings are capable of doing. But, we've seen in the past, what happens when leaders are allowed to abandon common decency in favour of rage and hate. Through the lens of history, we saw how the Holocaust happened and how many genocides happened and even in our backyard how hate led to 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, Aluthgama/Digana anti-Muslim violence. In this background, when will our people learn the lessons of history that hate cannot be dispelled by hate?

It is sad to witness that in the aftermath of this tragedy, another tragedy is in the process of becoming a reality. The monster of anti-Muslim hate appears to be rising again from the backwoods. This volatile situation where a group of terrorists bearing Muslim names carried out these monstrous attacks on churches and hotels, became an ideal breeding ground and a playfield for the hate lobbies who inflicted much damage and destruction in the Post-war era in Sri Lanka to re-enact their dramas. While the terrorists attacked physically, the hate groups used social media, ably supported by rogue sections of the Sinhala media like Hiru. Ada Derana, to begin their own brand of 'war of terror'. They began to attack the Muslims psychologically and mentally, making the entire Muslim community guilty by association. They began once again to brainwash the average moderate Sinhala mind (both Buddhist and Christian) about the inherent danger posed by the entire Muslim community. This included fake news, photo-shops and cherry picking Islamic quotes to show that Muslims are with the terrorists. A parallel anti-Muslim campaign is also happening in the Tamil media as well. This disastrous campaign is already attaining victory when we see Christian and Buddhist people appearing to be consuming this hate propaganda. This is a tragedy worse than the Easter attacks. Perhaps, this is what the Muslim extremist group want to achieve - to divide communities and make Muslims alienated so that their youths will be ready recruits to their radical groups. As a Sinhalese, I am feeling worried about how our past friendships and comradeship with the Muslim friends have given way to mutual mistrust and suspicion. This is another national tragedy indeed.

Our post-Independence history was full of racism and communalism. Barely we attained Independence with all political leaders of all communities coming together in 1948, when under a decade we had the election of SWRD, who fought his election platform on a racist agenda. This led to Sinhala only bill which divided Sinhala and Tamil communities. Two years later, in 1958, Ceylon (then) witnessed the first ever anti-Tamil riots. An year later, SWRD Bandaranaike fell to a bullet by

a Saffron clad Buddhist monk. This did not make the people to suspect every member of the Maha Sangha who wore a Siwura and ask the government to ban the Siwura. (quite rightly). Today, people are different and they are asking many cultural and religious symbols of Muslims to be banned including the Burqa. Burqa of course had a legitimate reason to be banned in this situation; but the hate peddlers are calling for more- even the Abhaya, madrasas etc. Well! the governments allowed this Sinhala Buddhist fever to take hold in the body public, renegading on various pacts signed with the Tamil parties and marginalizing the Tamil people through colonisation in the N& E. What happened in 1983 and how the JR Jayewardene government acted was really unacceptable which led to the internationalization of this ethnic conflict and the subsequent Tiger led period of terror. With the end of war in 2009, sense of triumphalism was witnessed with the Rajapaksa government posing off as the champion of the Sinhala Buddhists.

The religion I follow – Buddhism is widely accepted as a pacifistic and tolerant religion. Yet political ‘Sinhala Buddhism’ has been linked to ethnic violence in both Sri Lanka’s pre and post-independence history. The end of the war in May 2009 saw the resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism as a prominent force, the most patent instance of its link to violence being manifested in the June 2014 anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama, in culmination of the well-orchestrated hate campaign by hate groups like BBS, Sihala Ravaya etc with State patronage then. Later, the patent popularity of the ‘Sinha-Le’ campaign and other grassroot level hate movements, which appears to be politically-backed and well-organised, also provided convincing evidence of the power of ethno-nationalism as a tool to mobilise insecure masses. The involvement of Buddhist monks in politics following independence in 1948, in effect, also transformed Buddhism into a highly politicised religion. In *Buddhism Betrayed*, Stanley J. Tambiah draws attention to the paradox between Buddhism’s non-violent philosophy and the high degree of political violence in Sri Lanka. In fact, the first ethno-nationalist violence was directed against the Muslims and not the Tamils in 1915. ***Thus, religious extremism is not limited to Muslim extremism, but both Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil extremism too existed as well, as history in Post-Independence Sri Lanka has clearly proved.***

Having said that, it is a reality that extremism has been growing among the Muslim community specially since 1980s due to globalisation and opening of ME doors to Sri Lankans both for employment and pilgrimage. Even the social media has enabled Muslim youth to get radicalize online. I spoke to many Muslim friends and asked how these barbarians were not spotted earlier. They were crestfallen with a sense of shame in their faces because these animals bore Muslim names. But they maintained , many prior information about these deviants were made available to the government and the Intelligence by their religious leaders and even by the local community to which the main mastermind belonged – Kattankudy. They were enraged why these warnings were ignored. But, they also told me that although there were many sects (Jamaths) which cropped up among them in recent history with some with extremist inclinations and at times violence being seen among these groups , they did not expect these groups to be this violent and massacre the way these ‘Satans’ did. This NTJ activities were not within community’s public view. But, it should be accepted that Muslim mainstream did not speak up loudly against the growing trend of religious extremism and ghetto-isation including Arabisation. It is at least heartening to see the leaders and the community realizing this folly and saying ‘Mea-Culpa; even now. All they now need is a leader of the Cardinal calibre and a supporting mainstream society.

This awakening among the Muslim community, is a positive development and hope the Sinhalese too think in terms of Sri Lanka being the home to all and not through the lens of majoritarianism. If this awakening can start off a process of healing and building a common Sri Lankan identity in the country among Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, then those innocent souls would not have died in vain. However, unfortunately the growing anti-Muslim hate and hate peddlers pushing the Muslims

against a wall, may hamper this process of realising the dream of building an inclusive Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a multi- ethnic and multi-cultural nation and not a Sinhala Buddhist State although the latter is the dominant community. Former Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe who appears on TV now lobbying for Galagoda Atte Gnanasara Thero's release has forgotten that he also made a clear statement to the press when he was a Minister that Sri Lanka is not a Sinhala Buddhist State. It is on the basis of an inclusivity that all communities can be brought to together and not revisiting Sinhala Buddhist supremacy. Our public discourses should be on this unifying themes and not on divisive themes as propounded by hate peddlers. Those who dream for an inclusive Sri Lanka should NOT allow the hate peddlers to hijack the public narrative and spread hate venom and make a section of our people feel alienated and forlorn. Instead, the mainstream Muslim community should be supported to fight against the common enemy of extremism and radicalism among them- while still a fringe element. If the Sinhala community adopt a domineering approach, then this fringe element may grow in all probability. This is the danger we should all avoid at all costs.

Christian brethren should realize that Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups who are appearing as friends to them in their hour of grief, in fact attacked them too in the post-war era. Few weeks before the Easter Sunday attack, the Methodist church was attacked in Anuraphapura while many evangelic places of worship were attacked in many parts of the country initiated by rogue Buddhist monks. Thus, the Christian brethren should not fall prey into the game played by these hate peddlers that Muslims are their enemy hell-bent on killing them. It is not true. Sri Lanka suffered much from the brunt of extremist groups from all communities- Sinhala, Tamil and now Muslims. Marginalizing Tamils during Tiger rule had disastrous impact on Sri Lanka. Therefore, extremism and radicalism is a common enemy and we should all unite as one to fight these evils. Muslims has a pivotal role to play to fight religious extremism them. They have realized that it is in their own interests too. Helping them to do it and getting all communities onto the same page is paramount in fighting this cancer which seeks to destroy our common destiny. Walking together is the need of the hour,. There is no other way.

Further, Islamophobia is a powerful industry in the West. If we care to study what happened after 09/11, it is clear that demonising Islam and the Muslims became a cottage industry with the Media taking the lead. ISIS was a Western construct and part of the military adventurism of the West in the ME. They used Islam and Quran to find justification for their ill deeds. Did anyone realise that ISIS has killed more Muslims than others. Did anyone also realize that they have not lifted their finger against the Israelis. Thus, connecting ISIS atrocities to Muslims has ulterior intentions. Further, as Cardinal pointed out, these terror groups like ISIS who responsibility two days later for the acts of their local partners NTJ , do not operate many thousands of miles from their country of origin, on their own. There are international dimensions to this terror attack and already the patron of ISIS - US particularly is preparing to anchor their war ships to 'help' Sri Lanka' to fight terror. Weapon manufacturers have a stake in this game. We should not be fodder for them to achieve their evil ends at our expense.

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• COLOMBO TELEGRAPHE. MAY 12, 2019:
<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/fight-against-extremism-should-not-be-confused-with-islamophobia/>