

# How the Easter Bombings Left Sri Lanka's Muslims With No Path Forward

Thursday 19 December 2019, by [HANIFFA Farzana](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2019).

**Amidst hatred, which has risen to a crescendo, Muslims must also combat the emergence of hostile factions.**

*Farzana Haniffa gave the following talk at the Rajani Thiranagama Memorial Lecture, organised in Jaffna, on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of the eponymous human rights activist. Her speech is produced in full below.*

Good Afternoon. Let me start by thanking the Rajani Thiranagama Memorial Committee and the Jaffna People's Forum for Coexistence for inviting me to present this lecture on this 30<sup>th</sup> year remembrance of Rajani Thiranagama's tragic death at the hands of a young LTTE militant. I am incredibly humbled to have my work recognised as worthy of honouring Rajani's memory.

I am also aware of the context within which this choice is made, and this recognition is taking place.

In the aftermath of the bombings six months ago on April 21, 2019, we in Sri Lanka are at yet another crossroads. The death of 253 people at the hands of nine young Muslim male suicide bombers has unleashed immense trauma and suffering across communities. People are struggling today to come to terms with loss of life and limb the disappearance of support structures and destruction of community.

In this context of suffering we are also anticipating the tightening of democratic space in the country ostensible to protect us from the threat of Islamic militancy. The Rajapaksa dynasty's attempt to keep its political project alive received what seemed like a deathblow with the failure of the coup in October 2018. However the bombings have created the possibility of their resurgence.

The opening up of space for dissent in the aftermath of the presidential elections of 2015, and the possibility of progressive politics that seemed to emerge, now seems to be lost. The ability to speak again in opposition to those in power, some minimal achievements in the strengthening of rule of law, the passing of the Right to Information Act, the setting up of the Office of Missing Persons were achievements of that time.

As activists we have critiqued the minimal progress in the rule of law and accountability processes both for past war crimes, but also for corruption allegations under the current regime now coming apart at the seams. But the transformation that we are anticipating is such that even the [limited successes of the Yahapalanaya regime](#) loom now as achievements soon to be lost. We seem to be anticipating reverting back to an overly securitised regime with a vision of development limited to spectacular material progress for the few and shrinking of democratic space for the many.

This is the shift that occurred after April 21, 2019.

We remember you [#Rajini](#) !

Family members paid their tribute to Dr. [#RajaniThiranagama](#) at her 30<sup>th</sup> death remembrance at St. Jhones Church Cemetry [#Jaffna](#) this morning.

On 21<sup>st</sup> Sept.1989,Rajani an academic, activist & co-author of the Broken Palmyra was brutally gunned down [pic.twitter.com/fmgfc74uvm](https://pic.twitter.com/fmgfc74uvm)

— Ishara Danasekara (@IsharaDanasekar) [September 21, 2019](#)

I find it especially important and relevant that I have been asked to speak in Jaffna memorialising the brave and exemplary life of Rajani Thiranagama and her commitment to a struggle for justice under far more trying circumstances than those that we are facing today. Rajan Hoole speaking about Rajani on behalf of the UTHR in October 1989 quoted the following from the Broken Pamyrah,

“Objectivity, the pursuit of truth and the propagation of critical and honest positions, was not only crucial for the community but was a view that could cost many of us our lives. It was only undertaken as a survival task.”

Later on he explains these words of Rajani’s importantly, not as prophetic but as articulating the need to note a shift in the reality that Rajani’s death signaled at that time. I quote again -

Thus in Rajani’s views, the task of expressing the truth of what is going on around us impartially, and making people feel for the tragedy became a survival task. This is what the UTHR (Jaffna) tried to do in its first two reports. Rajani used the expression ‘creating a space’ to describe this work. She hoped that it will lead to some discussion, at least within the university, of what was happening around. She believed that sound values and anger against hypocrisy and injustice were major assets to survival.

The [UTHR report on Rajani’s death](#) notes the shift in Tamil politics that Rajani’s work and her death indicated. Appealing to those sympathetic to the Tamil problem the report notes that it is not widely recognised that (the Tamil problem) has moved far from the simple ethnic problem that it was seen to be in 1983. It is now one, where for the short term at least, the internal dimensions have by far overshadowed the external.

I will not say much more about the specificity of the long standing struggle that was articulated so well in 1989 by the UTHR and which ultimately took Rajani’s life. That it remains an ongoing struggle to articulate the internal critique in the face of terrible state racism and intransigence is understood.

The work that Rajani Thiranagama and the UTHR carried out were done under very different circumstance that are in no way similar to what we are facing now. While the stressors are intense and the future does not look very promising the everyday experience today is hardly the same. The kind of bravery and commitment required of Rajani and others at that time is not required of us today.

There is no equivalence. The deterioration of our situation is imminent and it is not clear what direction it may take. But it is important that we acknowledge the greater tragedy of the war years that the country as a whole is yet to come to terms with.

The similarity that I will see is this: we are in need of narratives. We are in need of frameworks through which to understand what happened to us as citizens of a very flawed state but also for Muslims as members of a minoritised group.

Muslims are a group whose leaders made specific choices about how they would engage with the state and a group whose mostly male leadership still insists – despite its size and internal fractures – on calling itself one community. At this time it is crucial that “the Muslim community” has a way of critically understanding what happened in April, how we are being made to seem as one and as culpable.

We should also not lose sight of the dire necessity to engage in self reflection and critique. When all possible interlocutors are insisting only on Muslim fault it is important that there is push back. Getting the balance right is our challenge.

Since the end of the war, there has been a sustained and very successful anti-Muslim movement that is giving voice to long-standing prejudices against Muslims and has enabled active harassment. The success of this movement, resonating with global trends has been such that today anti-Muslim rhetoric has the status of common knowledge.

Anti-Muslim sentiment, always present and dormant slowly built up in the aftermath of the war. It maintained a presence on the web for some months in the form of vitriol spewing blogs and Facebook pages and sporadic violence was perpetrated against small Muslim communities — in Anuradhapura in 2011 and Dambulla in 2012.

Then suddenly in January 2013 it was at the front and center of public discourse with marching monks, middle class apologists and the mainstream media all joining the fray. Almost overnight the activities of large sections of the Muslim community were publicly debated in the Sinhala media and practices of Muslims that had been in circulation for some time were being discussed, their ethics interrogated and their legitimacy undermined without any significant consultation or participation of Muslims themselves.

The movement gained added momentum with a trumped up controversy over the *halal* labelling process. This sentiment was spread with such success in its initial form in early 2013 that today many have forgotten that initial massive push that was necessary. Large scale orchestrated violence against Muslims — riots — are a fact of life today.

There were two events, Aluthgama in 2014 and Digana in 2018 that were of particular significance. Many more seem imminent. The bombings occurred then in the context of an ongoing anti-Muslim campaign that was being used periodically to fuel “riots” in Sri Lanka.

Let us [revisit the tragic events on April 2019](#). On Easter Sunday 2019, nine Muslim militant suicide bombers detonated themselves in six coordinated attacks across the country.

At 8.45 that morning bombers detonated themselves at St. Sebastians Church at Katuwapitiya, St. Anthony’s shrine at Kochchikade, and at the Shangri La and Kingsbury hotels in Colombo. At 8.50 there was an explosion at the Cinnamon Grand Hotel . At 9.05 at the Zion Church, Batticaloa.

The attacks caused the deaths of 253 people. The militants were members of the National Tauheed Jamaat and the Jamatheel Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) that have both now been banned. This possibility of an attack by Islamic militants — although periodically invoked—had not been seriously anticipated in the country’s troubled history. It was the most devastating incident of violence after the brutal end of the war in 2009, and one of the most deadly terrorist attacks in the world to date.

How did we miss this possibility?

By we, I mean those of us from the Muslim community, including political and civil society activists sometimes thought of as being in the know. Our position on the issue might have been influenced by

the fact that the figure of the Muslim militant has been a long-standing rhetorical device of anti-Muslim campaigners of various hues and there has been little evidence of their actual existence.

The issue of jihadists were raised by the LTTE during the Norwegian mediated peace process in 2001 and later on many careless commentators have seen Islamic militants “lurking” in the east. At one point politicians’ militias were called jihad groups; at other times groups armed by the military were named that.

The proliferation of small arms during the conflict saw the emergence of many armed underworld gangs – all, if Muslim, were termed jihadists. Muslim activists felt the need to repeatedly state in public to the security establishment – if there are jihadists, Islamic militants, Al Qaeda operatives or ISIS fighters, please arrest them.

In December 2012, the BBS had a prelaunch closed meeting in Kotte. At that meeting the Venerable Gnanasara talked of 12,000 jihadists being trained in the Maldives.

In the aftermath of Aluthgama, when the government took great pains to internationalise a narrative of Muslim culpability for the violence, member of parliament Champika Ranawaka, in a short film entitled the True story of Aluthgama, outlined that the violence occurred because there was a large meeting of Jihadists.

UN and embassy officials picking our brains about the ground situation, and Sinhala allies writing about anti-Muslim violence would routinely mention Muslim militancy in the east as if it was an established fact. In 2014 Gotabhaya Rajapaksa also stated that recalcitrant minorities bring about majority anger and that Sri Lanka’s next global threat was Islamic Militancy. In a context where global narratives saw an Islamic jihadist behind every beard and skull-cap and where anti minority sentiment was a condition for political existence, fielding this knowledge was exhausting.

Rauf Hakeem had the following exchange with Meera Srinivasan of the *Hindu* in the aftermath of the Digana violence:

*How do you respond to claims that there is rising fundamentalism in the Eastern Province, with funding from West Asian countries?*

You know, it’s very typical, this question after a lengthy interview of this nature. Not only you, several media people who have come to interview me end up asking this question. It is again a manifestation of an international mind set. But locally, I don’t see that Muslims have been radicalised to that extent so as to resort to violence.

When it comes to religious practice, whether it is in Hinduism, Christianity, or Judaism, there are different strains, different ideologies being practised by fringe groups. I don’t think we need to worry about these fringe groups as long as they don’t resort to violence as a means to propagate their culture or ideology.

Then Mohamed and Wanniasingham from an article in 2015 entitled *Fracturing Community: Intra-group Relations among the Muslims of Sri Lanka* state the following:

With regard to degenerative factionalism, the researchers also investigated the accusation made both within and outside the Muslim community that a Jihadist Movement was emerging in the East. On interviewing several Thablighi, Thawheed and Sufi representatives, it was found that while there is talk among discontented youth about espousing jihadi practices, these are just idle youth responding to the global trend

in Islam, but with no motivation or the means to make this a reality. Local organisations such as mosque federations are also monitoring the community and nipping such ideas in the bud. The ACJU, Shoora Council and local Mosque Federations confirmed that there are no Islamic Jihadi groups in Sri Lanka.

I expressed similar sentiments in a 2011 publication. At that time the threat was not ISIS, but Al Qaeda. In the article I tried to argue that Islamic reformist projects bringing about transformations in dress and practice were projects of personal piety and not those mobilising for political change.

This disavowal by such a range of disparate actors, barely in conversation with one another should be taken seriously today not because we were all being disingenuous but because within the frameworks that we were using to understand “community” and “jihadism” among Muslims this particular threat was not one that appeared as immediate.

Those in the Muslim community who considered themselves to be “community representatives” were clearly inadequately representative of their communities. Those of us conducting inquiries into such communities, or politicians having their constituencies from them, were speaking mostly to male mosque committee members – and were having inadequate access to the wider community of youth and women and to the disaffected.

It is important that both the politicians and the researchers think deeply about what this might mean.

Another issue that is important to note is that this form of radical sentiment is diffused, web and social media based, and finds disconnected community that does not claim to or feel the need to share a past or future. Muslims are popularly identified as part of tight knit and supportive and almost suffocatingly insular collectives.

Such collectives are considered opaque to the outside world because of the many protective and dense networks that might shield them. But what is apparent is the case of these individuals that we can now claim to have been “radicalised” is that they were removed from such community, and distanced themselves from well-known authority structures. They worked only with small kin groups and were looking for solidarity in an idea alone.

This “radicalisation” also speaks to a graver problem. It speaks to a revolt against the various Muslim communities, their authority structures, their ethical frameworks and the manner of their gatekeeping. This is where the critique and self-reflection needs to be grounded.

And this is where there should be a wake up call to the Muslim community. A large majority of Muslims especially the proponents of piety, function on an assumption of ethical superiority based on the cultivated commitment to the faith. This commitment requires showcasing and maintenance.

Community gatekeepers — both men and women — maintain piety practices through shaming those who do not comply; by stating that they are less than pious, less than the ideal. What the appearance of 100 plus persons, enamoured of the Caliphate and looking for community outside indicates is that this ethical framework is becoming irrelevant for some.

There are other ways in which this control of pious elders is being challenged. One is the young women agitating for reform of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. But this flirtation with Daesh and the Caliphate is clearly a far more dangerous wake up call for Sri Lanka’s Muslims.

But another more pedestrian reason why our refusal to see the many jihadists that the others saw is what the community leaders stated to Mohamed and Wanniasingham – *such ideas were the province*

*of youth without the motivation or the means.*

When we are provided information with regards to *the motivation and the means* that propelled these bombers to detonate themselves we will be better aware of how this phenomenon occurs and can be managed. The incident of the bombings is not attributable to the ISIS ideology of the bombers, their families and their groups of followers alone.

There is still much that is not clear about how money was made available, the targets were chosen, the bomb making training was imparted, timing was decided upon and the planning was carried out. Further the bombings were permitted to happen. The security apparatus was permitted to lapse.

We have not been informed as to what level of negligence has been established. We have been told that ISIS was not involved in the planning. But no information is still available about who was. It is election season and we are fed information about the rounding up of Zaharan's followers. We see on television the spectacle of visibly Muslim people being transported to and from a Black Maria. But we have ceased to hear about the intelligence that was received and not acted upon.

Until the money trail is revealed it is possible to speculate that the sentiments held by these fringe groups were enabled into action by forces that are as yet unidentified. Those who benefited from the fallout are many and the stakes are very high. Until we know otherwise it is hard to imagine that the intention behind the bombings was the bombers attainment of martyrdom alone.

The bombings have left the country's Muslim community completely at sea as to how they might move forward in the aftermath. There are many disparate and uncoordinated activities much of the time involving the same people. Some of this activity began with the emergence of the BBS.

There are three possible frames through which this can be discussed:

1. Dealing with heightened anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the country.
2. Dealing with the narrowing of space and the emergence of the security apparatus in the north and east, now targeting Muslims.
3. The upending of authority structures among Muslims.

### **Dealing with heightened anti- Muslim sentiment throughout the country**

In a context where anti-Muslim sentiment was already rife, every Muslim was seen as complicit with, directly involved in and accountable for the bombings. The seamless mapping of the attacks on to the readily available rhetoric of the anti-Muslim movement was *made* inevitable by the leadership's refusal to take responsibility for their failure to prevent the attacks. The dysfunctional state of the government in the aftermath of the attempted coup in October was at least partly responsible in the security establishment's failure to prevent the bombings.

The ineptitude of the president and the prime minister and their complete disavowal of responsibility set the tone and permitted the anti-Muslim sentiment to reign free.

When the evidence of the president's own negligence and attempts at a cover-up were mounting, he pardoned the Venerable Gnanasara. The chief spokesperson of the anti-Muslim movement, and the secretary general of Bodu Bala Sena, had been in jail on charges of contempt of court at the time of the bombings.

Part of Gnanasara's rhetoric had been that 'Muslim extremists' were harbouring 'jihadist cells'. On May 23, 2019, he was released on a presidential pardon. The gesture decided not just how the national conversation on the bombings was to be conducted in the future but also announced to the

country that the anti-Muslim movements' own possible culpability in the cultivation of jihadists sensibility would not be part of the conversation.

Given the leaders' repudiation of responsibility and theirs and the entire social and political system's complicity in building up and sustaining the anti-Muslim sentiment, this was perhaps to be expected.

The outpouring of journalists and commentators views in the aftermath often read as the airing of long held prejudices. There were comments about good and bad Muslims, about the spread of Wahabism and about madrasas. All changes in Muslim religious practices that had occurred in the past 30 to 40 years were discussed as if the inevitable endpoint of all Islamic religious mobilisation was terrorism.

Islamic religious practices long targeted by the BBS and other anti-Muslim groups were written about in legitimate newspaper columns as "problems." The reportage indicated a lack of knowledge on the history of Muslim religious transformation in the country that had occurred over several years and had accelerated visibly during the war years.

As M.A. Nuhman, Fara Mihlar, Mohomad and Wanniasingham and myself have documented, with varying degrees of detail there is great complexity of religious affiliation among the different Muslim communities. Arguably there is still no substantive mapping of the different groups or a historical account of their emergence.

The Salafi and Tauheed groups that the now derogatory term "Wahabi" generally refers to were only one group propagating reform and they were not necessarily the most successful. While some Salafi-Tauheed groups were very vocal, the Tabligh Jama'at was probably the largest and most widespread, as was the Jama'athi Islami the group with arguably the most sensitive to the contextual specificities of Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Sufi groups include those who celebrate local sheikhs like the Quadiriya orders of Beruwela but also those who are part of global sufi networks like the Naqshbandiya.

Mohamed and Wanniasingham suggest a further complication of groups. Most commentators had little awareness even of this basic taxonomy and seemed uninterested in understanding the complexity. There was no acknowledgement of the fact that the piety movement's emphasis on religiosity resonated strongly with the vast majority of Muslims most of them not attached to any group.

The positive transformations that this new frame of reference brought about among Muslims across the country were also not acknowledged. There were a few articles in the immediate aftermath that called for explanations from both the security establishment and the political elite. They were scathing in their critique of politicians. One called for an understanding of Zaharan's group not as representative of the entire Muslim community but as a cult that had little popular support. These were needed but they were sparse.

The organised economic boycott against Muslim businesses is ongoing. Destroying local Muslims' economy seems to have been the primary motivating factor behind the riots in the Kurunegala district a few weeks after the bombings as well.

Everywhere in the country, there are reports of people being asked to leave long term rental premises. It is almost impossible to rent new places. There are Facebook groups for all of this. One Facebook group - a collective of Sinhala businesses - was sharing information about the availability of shops and land for sale to be shared only with Sinhalese.

For a few months after the attacks there was a coordinated attempt to keep the anger against Muslims at a fever pitch. The Venerable Gnanasara held a moderately well attended rally at Bogambara grounds in Kandy, then the political monk Athureliye Rathana engaged in a fast unto death asking for the resignation of two Muslim politicians.

The entire group of Muslim cabinet ministers resigned in protest at his antics. The most troubling of these circus like displays through which the conspiracy theories of the anti-Muslim movement were mobilised was the Dr. Shafie debacle. A Muslim doctor attached to the Kurunegala teaching hospital and carrying out Caesarian sections was accused of sterilising thousands of Sinhala women by squeezing their Fallopian tubes.

The anti-Muslim phobia was whipped up to such an extent against the doctor that 800 women were found with complaints against him. The police filed a case against him and investigated him on the basis of the allegations. State resources were spent on a case taking as a given the conspiracy theory regarding Muslims plotting a future take over through the force of numbers. An anxiety based on the conspiracy theory of the anti-Muslim rhetoric was taken to be assurance enough to begin a government investigation and a criminal case against the doctor.

One of the first acts of the government under emergency regulations was the imposition of a ban on covering the face. These included the niqab and full face motorcycle helmets. Government institutions, schools and hospitals refused entry to women who were dressed in any identifiably Muslim clothes. There was jubilation when the emergency laws banned the face cover but all Muslim dress was rendered suspect. Women were made to take off their headscarves before entering certain premises and refused entrance if they did not.

The legitimising of anti-Muslim sentiment in the aftermath of the bombings is such that it seems irreversible. It is unclear what political use will now be made of this state of affairs. The Sri Lankan state and regimes have benefitted from minoritising group identities and then manipulating them for various political ends. Since it is time for a presidential election, where all votes count, not much is being permitted to happen.

But the possibility of mobilising against Muslims remains so easy today, many electoral, nationalist and business goals could now so conveniently be met that it is inevitable that the carnival of harassment and violence will resume. With campaigning for the general election it is likely that the scapegoating of Muslims will take off once again.

### **Dealing with security apparatus now targeting Muslims**

The security apparatus seems to have emerged almost completely intact from the pre-2015 times and is being directed this time with the same format and same strategies as they were then done but with the Muslims as the primary target. In the extensive and invasive search operations that are being conducted, harassment as method is clear.

There was also systematic targeting of those seen to belong to any community organisation and close to people. Any relatives visiting, any friends dropping by have to be explained to security forces personnel who felt at liberty to turn up at any time of the day. Clearance was required for organisations to carry out their programs and while various complicated questions were asked about resource persons and the program content prior to granting clearance, clearance could also be withdrawn with no notice.

There were constant inquiries by local representatives of the CID and the TID and the NIB about the activities of organisations. The pattern was familiar from years of harassment of Tamil organisations.



The situation outside the north and east seems a bit different. Everyone known to have had some connection with any group with the Tauheed name are being investigated. The authorities are following up on even the most far-fetched tip-offs and there are instances where other enmities and resentments are being worked out in this fraught context.

Different mosques and different reformist groups are reporting about one another and neighbourly and workplace squabbles are being sorted out through such reports. Arrests are being made on the basis of such reports. No report on torture has been recorded so far. There a number of fundamental rights violation cases that have been filed.

### **The upending of authority structures among Muslims.**

This act of terrorism was puzzling, distressing, incomprehensible and substantially life changing to the large majority of local Muslims across region and class. Dealing with the fall out of the attacks many across the country were angry; but unclear as to where to direct their anger.

Many turned against fellow Muslims. The piety movement's enormous successes in the past few decades was brought about by the active mobilisation of several different religious orientations.

Members of these factions, with variations in practice held very dear, often treated one another with anger, suspicion and resentment. Such enmities were heightened in the aftermath of the bombings

There were several different fault lines that became apparent in the immediate aftermath. Because of Zaharan Hashim's association with the group National Tauheed Jamaat, tauheed became a bad word. Some within the Muslim middle class who had been subjected to their relatives' Tauheed inclinations, had been sidelined or critiqued as not sufficiently pious, or shamed for still wanting to drink or smoke or dress "like the kafirs," felt vindicated.

Middle-class Muslims associated with Salafi practices and formerly proud in their long held position of community leadership were suddenly suspect and their status depleted and the brunt of other Muslims' ire. Many were shocked out of their complacent moral superiority.

There was also substantial opposition against the Tablighi Jama'at group that was most insistent on the niqab for women. Ever sensitive to context many of them transformed their dress practices overnight. In my family, an uncle who is a Tabligh Jama'at stalwart, who had spearheaded his entire extended family's transformation towards greater piety, drastically changed his dress. Generally bearded and thwab wearing, he now wears trousers and shirts.

His wife, formerly hijab, abaya and niqab wearing went about in a saree with the shawl on the head.

These actions were especially troubling because the transformation in dress had been hard won. It did not come easily it was done with preaching about the right way, many hours spent in prayer trying to convince others of the right path, constant and vigilant policing and if necessary shaming of regular practices.

Other Muslims who had been loathe to fall in line with the Salafi or even the Jama'at movements had been sidelined socially by these groups shaming practices. Many of them who had refrained from commenting were now vocal in their critique and dismissal of the movement's priorities, modes of engagement and challenged their authority.

There has been some commentary on the Sufi Salafi confrontations with the Sufis generally seen as the "good" Muslims hounded by the reformist Wahabis. There has not been adequate attention paid to the support bases of the Sufi groups in different parts of the island. There have been significant

confrontations between the Sufis and members of Tauheed groups in both the East and the South. Zaharan's opposition to the Rauf Maulvi group in Kattankudi, and the Tauheed groups damaging of another Sufi leader Payilvan's body in 2006 had received some press.

In 2009 a small Tauheed mosque - Masjidul Rahman - was attacked by members of the Alawwiya Tarika and the Quadiriya Tharika in Beruwela. It was the time of the annual mosque feasts at the famous Ketchimalai and Buhari mosques frequented by the two groups. The Alawwiya Tarika feast alone was attended by over 80,000 people.

The day after the Alawwiya feast and on the day of the Quadiriya feast the Masjidul Rahuman Tauheed mosque preached that these feasts were haram and that those carrying them out were kafirs. And this was not the first time that they had done that.

Today the Sufi groups are taking advantage of the anti-Muslim movement narrative that portrays them as the "good" and "traditional" Muslims.

Another development of the past several years that has been receiving some pushback from community elites as well as from grass roots community activists has been the increased organisational strength and presence of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama in an ever-widening field of activities.

The ACJU, demonised today as backward with regards to women's issues and as a bastion of conservatism, has substantial support at community level due to the manner in which it has institutionalised itself and its branch networks. As religious leaders they also have ready acceptance among communities at all levels.

Aware of the manner in which their representation as the community's only non-political leadership has begun to reflect on Muslims in general, push back has been building. While many Muslim business and professional elites are supportive of the organisation taking on a religious leadership, and are open to recognising the scholarly authority of the membership, they are now quite invested with limiting the range of activities that the ACJU is engaged in.

But the ACJU remains entrenched, well funded, well organised and widely accepted in the communities. The organisation is responding by being cordial and accommodating of their opposition. Non controversial but authoritative. As any religious leadership they speak with the confidence of their acceptance and legitimacy.

There is a lull now that the attention has shifted to the presidential elections. Relatives and acquaintances seem relieved and read the shift as the country as a whole moving on from the experience of the bombings. Some community activists however are uneasy at both the mood of the Muslims and also the heightening of excitement around the elections.

Some of the activists that I spoke to were concerned about whether all of those associated with the National Tauheed Jama'at or harbouring their ideals had been identified. The possibility of that form of violence remains. Then the niqab ban is no longer in effect. Many are worried that women wearing the niqab might be used to incite another "riot" somewhere.

No one who is working on the issue believes that things are getting better. Many are waiting for violence. Any one of the factions could use the violence as a distraction tactic. It is simply a matter of time.

## **Conclusion**

The state and the political class in Sri Lanka has required and benefited from violence perpetrated mostly but not only against ethnic and religious minorities.

After the end of the war we had the emergence of the anti-Muslim riot. It is yet to be seen if bombings by Islamic militants is going to be the next form of violence that we will have to experience as part of our everyday.

Those who are benefiting from the fear and discomfort are in full force now and we are seeing the reduction of our democratic space. Recently the cabinet approved the drafting of new legislation to deal with the threat of ISIS.

We have no knowledge of how it might be shaped or what will be the content. It is to cover that which does not come under the current laws, we have been told. That in itself is ominous. Another example is the dismissal of the Jaffna university vice-chancellor citing security concerns. This decision and this justification has received the support of the UGC.

Many have commented already on how making a decision on an academic appointment citing concerns experienced by the military shrinks the democratic space.

How we are to address these new problems remains, as of yet, unclear. At the least, it is important that we have as much information as possible and be as knowledgeable as possible. It is also important that we think of these problems as ones which are having an impact outside of our narrowly defined ethnic and religious communities.

I consider this invitation as a great honour bestowed on me but also as an important step in taking forward a broader collective conversation on how to address these new conditions. Such conversations help us identify that these new conditions are also channeling some very old undemocratic forces and institutional structures in restricting our democratic freedoms.

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