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Sri Lanka Should Not Turn a Blind Eye to the Ascent of Wahabi Extremism

Thursday 19 December 2019, by [HOOLE Rajan](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2019).

In the aftermath of the Easter bombings, factors fuelling the gradual rise of Wahhabi extremism in Sri Lanka are at the forefront.

Investigations have identified the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ) - a Wahabi faction from Kattankudy, near Batticaloa - as the [perpetrators of Sri Lanka's Easter terror attacks](#).

The story of the advance of Wahabi terror within the Muslim community is closely linked to the transformation of urbane Tamil nationalism of the educated middle class which demands language and territorial rights - an issue on which Muslims in the Eastern Province shared common aspirations.

In both instances, the infliction of communal violence (against the Muslims particularly in 2014 and 2018) with casual impunity, played an important role in the transformation,

Once the LTTE asserted sole dominance of the Tamil struggle through ruthless terror, the democratic aspirations of the early Tamil militancy drawn from other liberation struggles, died; and with it the prospect of resolving local differences with Muslims by democratic means. The LTTE's approach to Muslims through force and arrogance culminated in its [Kattankudy mosque](#) and the [Eravur massacres](#) in August 1990.

The government quickly set up the Muslim home guards, which became a paramilitary arm of the Defence Ministry and a nuisance to local Muslim civilians. The LTTE's ruthlessness and success, albeit transient, was a model, not lost on its detractors. Its practice of branding opponents as traitors matched well with the progress of Wahabi influence in Muslim areas from the 1980s.

In Tamil society, its nationalist politicians found in the militant youth, extra-legal means to secure parliamentary seats, as exemplified in the [1975 murder of Alfred Duraiappa](#). Similarly, the moderate Muslim politicians and the Wahabi religious elders came to depend on thuggery by their youthful followers to secure places in the parliament or to forcibly take over mosques of the traditional Sufi sects. There was no escape from the sinews of such unholy dependences.

These are conditions under which dissent is crushed and dishonoured. We begin our inquiry from the standpoint of Muslim women who have challenged the advance of Wahabism on the ground.

The ground report on extremism

Sabina (name changed), a Muslim who worked tirelessly for Tamil victims of the long drawn conflict, remarked of her apprehension of the imminent havoc around extremism:

“We saw the monster growing before our eyes. Many moderate Muslims complained to

the authorities, as several leaders in Kattankudy did last August and again in February. We shared on February 10, a video clip of [Zahran](#), in which he called for the killing of oppressors of Muslims, through Whatsapp with several individuals linked to the government and the opposition. Nothing happened. We learnt that when a person at the Prime Minister's office apprised a trusted moderate Muslim leader of this video, the latter dismissed it as nothing very serious."

She also said that she sent this video to Facebook and she understood that Facebook, in turn, had informed the Sri Lankan authorities.

On the proliferation of hate through narrow religious interpretations, Sabina said that in the run-up to the 2018 local council elections, [Moulavi Siddeq Niyas from the Sri Lanka Thowheed Jamath](#) (SLTJ) had taken issue with the uncovered faces of women contestants on posters (Hoole). He had also given the names of several Muslim women who had demonstrated before the Parliament for reform in September 2017, including Sabina's, and said that they should be killed in order for Islam to progress.

The Elections Commission could have called for his arrest under election laws but failed to do so. Zahran who split from the SLTJ to form the All Ceylon Thowheed Jamath in 2014, again split to form the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ).

Sabina further said,

"In the development of an oppressive ideology, the first target is to control of women and forcing upon them norms of dressing and behaviour that would make them strangers to the people they have long lived among. In turn, their children are brainwashed into xenophobia by the same *moulavis*. You saw what the LTTE did among Tamils through ideological control. When it suited them they used women as suicide bombers. At other times they merely wanted them to be instrumental bearers of fighters."

The [Easter bombings](#) left the island's Muslim clerical establishment in a tizzy. Responding to the attack on Muslims on May 5, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith went to Negombo and [held the hand of Rizwi Mufti](#), the President of the All-Ceylon Jammatul Ulema (ACJU) and said that they both worshipped the same God.

It was a culmination of conciliatory attitudes by churches - the main targets of the Easter violence - which restored a measure of calm to the Island.

Muslim women, who have fought the ACJU regarding the reform of laws relating to women, see in this development, the entrenchment of the Wahabi establishment represented by the ACJU, whose ideological offspring was the Easter bombers.

Deep State or bungling state?

The militancy of the Thowheed Jamath has its origins in a [fatwa issued by the ACJU in 1989](#) against the popular Sufi teacher Abdullah (Pailwan) of Maruthamunai in the East, declaring him and his followers as apostates; and the setting up of Muslim home guard units in 1990.

The fatwa was evidently based on a biased reading of Abdullah's book in Tamil *Do You Know the Truth of Iman?*, and after many court hearings, the ACJU in 1996, revoked the fatwa (Schwartz). However, the original fatwa served as a licence for violence and persecution against Pailwan and his followers. The ACJU appears to have done little to support the victims.

On mid-day October 31, 2004, 500 Wahabis organised under the title “Jihad” again set the Meditation Centre of Pailvan’s followers in the centre of Kattankudy ablaze, [destroying](#) 117 buildings owned by Sufis and one Sufi was shot and killed by gunfire.

The alleged mastermind of the Easter carnage makes his photographic appearance in the *Sunday Times* [feature of August 16, 2009](#) (Kamalendran), dealing with Wahabi violence against Sufi groups, as Moulavi M.C. (Mohammed Cassim) Zahran, Propaganda Secretary of the Thowheed group in Kattankudy.

He denied that they were an armed group with external funding. Another Thowheed follower M.P. Azmi said, “We have a duty to correct the Muslims who are going on the wrong path. That is what we are doing.”

The same report also said that an unspecified number of Muslim home guards had deserted their ranks with their weapons, and sections had started calling themselves Jihadis. The report quoted the Saudi Embassy Counsellor Mr Al Khenene as saying that while the Saudi Government was not helping Islamic groups in the country, “certain wealthy persons” were aiding the construction of mosques.

While up to a point the localised thuggery of the Thowheed suited the Wahabi controlled ACJU, by 2014 its aggressive zeal and growing splits had the ACJU worried.

The Tamil daily *Veerakesari* on March 15, 2017, reported a meeting of the NTJ in Kattankudy where pro-ISIS slogans were shouted, leading to a clash. We verified that it was an attack on the Sufi mosque of Moulavi Rauff led by Zahran on March 10 2017. A clash ensued when others came to the defence of the mosque.

Zahran was among those the police arrested, who despite having caused injuries with swords, were soon released due to political influence. Among them was Mohamed Niyas, who is said to have left for the Middle East and was seen again just before the Easter attack. He was among those who [committed suicide](#) when the security forces went to his hideout in Sainthamaruthu, south of Kattankudy.

Women who were campaigning for reform had filed a case against Mohamed Niyas for defamation, which was scheduled to be heard on March 14, 2017. They learnt that, all of a sudden, he and his brother had plenty of money.

Soon after the Easter bombings, Rizwi Mufti told a meeting of religious leaders at the Parliamentary Complex (on April 28, 2019) that in June 2014, he had [given “all the documents”](#) on ISIS activity, to Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. He wanted him to have certain persons arrested. His warnings, he said were ignored by the Rajapaksa and its successor government (Rizwi).

However, the Defence Ministry had routinely infiltrated the parent Sri Lanka Thowheed Jamath (SLTJ). Its agent was the Secretary Moulavi Razik, also known for his fiery Wahabi sermons, and as Gotabhaya’s man.

R. Abdul Razik, a leader of the moderate Ceylon Thowheed Jama’ath (CTJ) told [CBS](#) on May 3, 2019, that:

“We asked the intelligence agencies to take down the Facebook page of Zahran because he was polluting the minds of Sri Lankan Muslims. We were told it is better to allow him to have the page so that the authorities could keep an eye on [him].”

The government spokesman Minister Rajitha Senarathne [used](#) Razik's assertion to claim that Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (GR) had supported Muslim and Buddhist extremism and had funded them using a "secret Defence Ministry account".

Thowheed Jamath pointed to several fractious outfits and it was the Defence Secretary's job to pay spies, even in the BBS.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa has to answer a more apposite question. There was copious information about the incendiary activity and the hateful rhetoric of Wahabi militants in Kattankudy, and their receipt of large funds. How did the defence secretary allow the grass of Wahabi terror to grow under his feet?

Moreover, has not the Bodu Bala Sena, whose anti-Muslim terror has begotten much mischief, and to which GR has well-publicised links, been a major cause of the pain forcing on Muslims the yoke of Wahabi extremism?

Zahran's [video address](#) of early 2019 February raises questions that have puzzled observers. The resemblance to LTTE is striking, as the injunction to kill traitors instantly without pity. But the thrust of the message was the consignment to hell of the droves of Buddhist extremists, who have killed Muslims and vandalised their mosques and businesses.

Then why attack churches? Once the video was out, time was running out for Zahran. Unlike the LTTE, Zahran's followers had to function in urban settings with hostile rival Thowheeds infiltrated by state intelligence. He used brainwashed family units as his operational cover.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa has [announced](#) his presidential candidacy for the coming elections as the man to rid the country of Islamic terrorism, after his record of championing Buddhist extremism while being imperiously blind to its effect on Muslims. He spent his years as defence secretary crying wolf about an armed LTTE revival.

The eight or so intelligence agencies he left behind slumbered through the impending danger. When two policemen were killed last November in Vavunativu, three miles through lagoon and scrubland from Kattankudy, the police arrested two former LTTE cadres under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Only later investigations in the aftermath of the Easter attacks [confirmed that it was the NTJ](#).

The tragedy of a non-secular state

Sri Lanka's non-secular state, obliged since the [1972 Constitution](#) to protect and foster Buddhism, has encouraged other major religious establishments to demand and successfully carve out their own small kingdoms, to include even nominally secular universities.

This milieu has been the basis for the ACJU's tyranny over groups of increasingly educated and articulate Muslim women who have for thirty years agitated for the reform of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) that would bring the rights of Muslim women in line with those of women of other communities.

These women point out that reform is necessary not just for the Muslim community, but for peace in the country. The cracks and the bereavements of Easter will be papered over, the leaders of civil society and the muftis will shake hands amidst smiles and go away. But the real problem, which is Wahabi ascendancy and xenophobia, will remain hidden. The alienation and isolation of the Muslim community, which was at the root of the Easter tragedy, will continue.

The reforms demanded are very basic and include a ban on child marriage, mandatory registration

of Muslim marriages and to raise the age of marriage for Muslim women from 12 to 18. Spearheading the resistance to such reform is the ACJU, and this has become the ground for extremist abuse of women demanding reform.

These women point out that the effect of the Easter carnage, by temporarily at least undermining the terrorist extremists, has entrenched the power of the ACJU over Muslims despite some embarrassment. They point out that its head, Rizwi Mufti, who had earlier called women who did not wear the veil prostitutes, has now asked them to remove the veil.

Their main fear is the ACJU's perpetuation of the Wahabi stranglehold: which will not countenance reform particularly of the MMDA; which is essential to free Muslim women from their present isolation; which opens the floodgates to unsubstantiated propaganda, presenting the community as conspiratorially expanding their influence through high birth rates.

Association of a community's strength with mere numbers is an illusion fostered by the electoral system. It is not a symbol of strength when a Muslim girl from the East says at a demonstration for reform before Parliament:

“I was forced to become a mother of twins at 13, when I should have been bearing schoolbooks. It was with a sense of nausea that I beheld my infants calling me Umma (Mother). My husband left me and I do not have support from anyone.”

An important reason why the MMDA reform is stuck, the women reformers say, is because, most Muslim men who have reached the pinnacle of their careers, especially in public service, will not go against the ACJU's dictates. Conservatism is reinforced by direct Saudi influence.

This writer was reliably told by persons in authority that in the Muslim Fatwa Council of about 45 headed by Rizwi Mufti, up to a dozen are paid by the Saudi Government.

An associated issue, which lies at the back of Sri Lanka's tragedy, is the politicisation and collapse of law enforcement, where politicians have usurped the roles of an independent police and judiciary. The independence of religious establishments, too, is open to question. The effects are seen in the failures of law enforcement above and in the ineffectiveness of protection afforded to the minority that stands up for principles.

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