Post-conflict interfaith activities, combatting religious extremism and mass atrocity in Sri Lanka

Actividades interreligiosas de posguerra, pluralismo religioso y atrocidades terroristas en Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study examines Sri Lanka's conflict history and interfaith dialogue (IFD), situated with regard to the devastating 2019 Easter bombings. Religious identity has become more conspicuous in Sri Lankan society, as demonstrated in more religious extremism and interfaith activities, including among actors and groups who traditionally avoided such initiatives. Based on narrative analysis of interviews with representatives from the country's four major religions discussing interfaith activities, communal relations and Buddhist extremism, this paper highlights how legacies from the war have exacerbated long-lasting divisions and mistrust between the country's ethno-religious groups, even if they were not the original conflict actors.
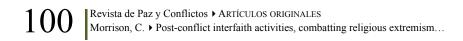
Following ethno-religious conflict, local-level interfaith activities have limited impact as they do not reach extremists and generally engage people already committed to non-violent social change. Since the civil war termination in 2009, faith groups and civil society have expressed reservations about inter-communal relations and the potential for further violence. These fears were realised with the devastating Jihadi bombings in Easter 2019.

Key words: Sri Lanka, terrorism, interfaith, post-conflict, Muslims, extremism

Resumen

Este estudio examina la historia de los conflictos y el diálogo interreligioso en Sri Lanka, en relación con los devastadores bombardeos de Pascua de 2019. La identidad religiosa se ha vuelto más notoria en la sociedad de Sri Lanka, como se demuestra en la presencia de un mayor extremismo religioso y actividades interreligiosas, incluso entre actores y grupos que tradicionalmente evitaban tales iniciativas. Basado en el análisis narrativo de entrevistas con representantes de las cuatro religiones principales del país que discuten actividades interreligiosas, relaciones comunales y extremismo Budista, este documento destaca cómo los legados de la guerra han exacerbado las divisiones duraderas y la desconfianza entre los grupos etnoreligiosos del país, incluso si no fueron los actores originales del conflicto.

Después del conflicto etnoreligioso, las actividades interreligiosas a nivel local tienen un impacto limitado ya que no llegan a los extremistas y generalmente involucran a personas que ya están comprometidas con el cambio social no violento. Desde el final de la guerra civil en 2009, los grupos religiosos y la sociedad civil han expresado sus reservas sobre las relaciones

intercomunitarias y el potencial para una mayor violencia. Estos temores se hicieron realidad con los devastadores bombardeos yihadistas en la Pascua de 2019.

Palabras clave: Sri Lanka, terrorismo, interreligioso, posconflicto, musulmanes, extremismo

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the relationships between ethno-religious relations and violence, and interfaith activities, in the context of post-civil war Sri Lanka. This study illustrates the phenomenon that targets of violence are not necessarily the original conflict actors or representatives of a perpetrator group. To situate the data for this paper, the respondents were interviewed in 2014 following a series of ethnic riots that mostly targetted Muslims. The interviewees argued that violence had become 'normalised' as a problem-solving mechanism in Sri Lankan polity and the country's ethno-religious relations had been severely damaged as a result of the civil war legacies, even though the main perpetrators and victims of post-2009 violent riots were not the original wartime actors or their proxies. The respondents discussed the likelihood of further group violence, and suggested that it would probably be based on religious rather than ethnic divisions.

There are some perplexing elements surrounding the 2019 bombings. Sri Lanka has a recent history of Buddhism extremism, so why were the bombings primarily attacking Christians and churches? Given how much Muslims suffered in the war from the LTTE (Tamil Tigers), why did the bombers not specifically target Tamils? To what extent do the bombers represent the grievances of Sri Lankan Muslims more generally?

The rise of domestic anti-Muslim discourse and mob violence is however an insufficient cause of the 2019 bombings. There is also the factor of the divided and inefficient governance and security apparatus of the Sri Lankan state, which was unable or unwilling to heed warnings from different sources that a terrorist attack was imminent. Political infighting and lack of information-sharing at elite levels highlights the necessity for coordination and transparency when dealing with terrorist threats, and the risks of erratic implementation of security policies.

This article proceeds as follows: I provide an overview of the Easter 2019 events and security failures, and then a literature review that examines Islam in Sri Lanka, interfaith work, terrorism incidence, and post-war legacies. There is a section on research methodology, timing, and the iterative nature of interview data. Following this, the bulk of the article engages with the interviews to focus on religious identities and extremism in modern Sri Lanka, and then the impacts and limitations of interfaith peacebuilding efforts. The conclusion draws together the contested positionality of ethno-religious groups in a pluralistic society, and civil war impacts, in how these influence the conditions for further mass violence. This paper suggests that the Easter 2019 bombings expose the limitations of interfaith activities, but more saliently, the relevance of both *direct causal factors* of terrorist violence and the *conditions* in which it occurs. The conditions in this case relate most strongly to post-war tensions and divisions, normalisation of violence, and shortcomings of interfaith efforts among other aspects of peacebuilding activities. Although the scale and type of violence perpetrated by extremists from Buddhism and Islam may differ, they have much in common in terms of worldview, claims to victimhood and scapegoating of 'the other'.

2. The 2019 Easter bombings in context

For the future, ethnic conflict will not be the main conflict, it will be religious.

(Sri Lankan Catholic Priest speaking in 2014)[1]

Following the cessation of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka has witnessed multiple attacks linked to Buddhist extremist organisations such as the Bodu Bala Sena[2] (BBS) and others, targeting Muslims and to a lesser extent Christians. Multiple ethnic riots have featured street killings by mobs, and destruction of property, businesses and houses of worship. Post-war tensions and armed violence are associated more with anti-Muslim sentiment than anti-Tamil, despite the dynamics of the main conflict actors during the civil war. Sri Lanka has a long history of ethnic riots and massacres (Imtiyaz & Stavis 2008), but the most destructive post-war riots have occurred in 2014 and 2018. Incidents of terrorism or mass atrocities carried out by Islamic extremists were notable by their absence.

However, that changed drastically on 21 April 2019. During Easter services, a well-coordinated series of Jihadi bombings targeted churches, hotels and subsequently homes in and around the capital Colombo and the town of Batticaloa on the East coast. Of the 259 people killed, 45 were foreigners, and over 500 people were injured (Asia Times 2019). The Easter 2019 events deeply shocked a populace already traumatised and divided by decades of open violence. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the violent separatist organisation that fought the Sri Lankan state from 1983 to 2009 during the civil war, was infamous for multiple suicide attacks on soft targets such as civilians, schools and businesses, but the 2019 bombing was the first large-scale terrorist attack since the end of the war 10 years previously.

On 23 April 2019, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as ISIS, claimed it had carried out the bombings (New York Times 2019). However, the Sri Lankan government claimed all the nine suicide bombers were Sri Lankan nationals from an Islamist organisation named *National Thowheeth Jama'ath* (NTJ), which had not previously attracted much attention from domestic security forces, although it had pledged allegiance to ISIL and was influenced by its philosophies (Aljazeera 2019). The NTJ was only banned on 27 April 2019, a week after the bombings, and its assets were seized by Sri Lankan security forces. On 23 April, State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene, stated that the government considered the bombings to be in retaliation for the anti-Muslim massacre in March 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand. However, this connection was disputed, most prominently by the New Zealand government (Reuters 2019), given that the Easter bombings must have been planned long before the Christchurch massacre and there was no concrete evidence that the events were connected.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, the Sri Lankan government blocked access to all social media networks and messaging services, allegedly to reduce the spread of misinformation or calls for retaliation, but this also had the effect of preventing people ascertaining the status or whereabouts of family members. Five days later on 26 April, the Sri Lankan Army and the Special Task Force, a para-military unit of the Police that specialises in counter-terrorism, carried out a search operation in Sainthamaruthu, a town on the eastern coast. There, three explosions and a shootout

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[1] Interview 12, Catholic Priest
[2] Normally translated in English as 'Buddhist Power Force'

occurred when the security forces raided a Jihadi base. Three suicide bombers detonated themselves, killing nine family members, six of them children, and three other Islamic militants were shot dead by security forces.

Following the bombings, contentious evidence emerged of severe operational and tactical weaknesses within Sri Lanka's security forces and Police, and they faced criticism for their intelligence failures. The government admitted it was responsible for a "major intelligence lapse" (BBC 2019). According to the leader of parliament, Lakshman Kiriella among others, Indian security forces had shared intelligence with Sri Lankan counterparts about potential terrorist attacks, for example on 4 April and 11 April 2019. These intelligence reports included specific data such as probable locations and targets, likely churches. Unfortunately, none of this intelligence was shared among senior decision-makers in Sri Lanka and no preventative action was taken by security forces. The prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, and his cabinet had not received any warnings about planned Jihadi attacks, as due to political infighting, they had been excluded from national security council meetings, led by President Sirisena. Similarly, Rajitha Senaratne, Sri Lanka's health minister, admitted on 22 April that the Sri Lankan authorities were warned two weeks before the terrorist attacks, and even divulged that some of the suspects had been named by the chief of national intelligence on 9 April (Guardian 2019).

There were calls for senior figures to resign, like Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando and particularly the Inspector General of Police, Pujith Jayasundara. Much of the deliberate lack of information sharing was due to the political rivalries between President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe,

and their supporting factions. For example, Sirisena had unsuccessfully tried to remove Wickremesinghe from office in October 2018, and following that, the Sri Lankan government was effectively split into two parallel administrations whose staff and offices had little communication with each other. Wickremesinghe attempted to hold a security council meeting on the Sunday morning following the 2019 bombings with the main security forces, but none were willing to attend the meeting without Sirisena's approval, who was abroad at the time (Guardian 2019). The previous President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, criticised the Sirisena administration and accused it of systematically undermining Sri Lanka's intelligence apparatus. Rajapakse even claimed the government bears full responsibility for the 2019 attacks, due to its failures to act on concrete intelligence or share vital information (Daily Mirror 2019a).

The Sri Lankan government is however to be commended for its handling of immediate post-bombings tensions, as they avoided any mass retaliation killings. A small number of violent revenge attacks occurred, but these were isolated and seemingly not coordinated. The main immediate responses were an outpouring of shock and grief at a national level. In a positive development, the post-bombing political environment was characterised by calls for peace from senior government leaders, and there were only a few and isolated revenge attacks against Muslims, nothing on the scale of previous ethnic riots. This could be an indication of how much influence the government retains regarding the potential for fomenting ethno-religious violence. The religious aspects of the Easter 2019 bombings are evident, as Islamic extremists attacked Christian places of worship and upmarket hotels as symbols of international power and globalisation.

For a country with as much experience of terrorist violence as Sri Lanka, the NTJ had previously attracted a curiously low level of interest from the security forces. Several Sri Lankan Muslim organisations had denounced the NTJ and its leader Zahran Hashim for indoctrinating youth into Jihadi fundamentalism, posting radical Islamic sermons on YouTube, fighting with monks and attacking Buddhist statues and temples (CNN 2019). Members of NTJ had been actively persecuting other Muslims, for example Sufis, in towns such as Kattankudy in the East for years prior to the bombings (CNN 2019). Following an incendiary YouTube posting by Zahran Hashim that promoted violent Jihad, the Chairman of a large mosque in Colombo denounced him to the authorities as a threat, as did the Vice President of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka. However, the security forces took no action. President Sirisena only outlawed the NTJ on 27 April 2019, *after* the suicide bombings (in which Zahran Hashim died). In a further indication that the NTJ had enemies within the Islamic community, a mosque used by the NTJ in Kekirawa was physically destroyed by local Muslims in May 2019 (Daily Mirror 2019b).

3. Literature Review

To contextualise the socio-political environment in which the 2019 bombings occurred, previous studies under four interconnected topics are relevant. These are the social position of Sri Lankan Islam, the impact of faith-based peacebuilding efforts, factors influencing the incidence of terrorism, and legacies of civil war. Each of these influences the socio-political environment, coupled with the shortcomings of state security apparatus described previously.

3.1. The contested positionality of Islam in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a highly complex religious environment, with a Buddhist majority and significant Christian, Hindu and Muslim populations; however, there is no exact correspondence between religious and ethnic identities. Most of the extant scholarly literature approaches the post-war social environment from the binary perspective that the ethnic groups of Sinhalese and Tamils were the primary conflict actors. The polarising impacts of the war had ramifications on the positioning of all social groups in the country; the identities of Muslims, during the war but also more generally, have not received sufficient attention by scholars or politicians (Haniffa 2007; McGilvray & Raheem 2007; Haniffa 2009). This lack of scholarly attention is likely a legacy of the conflict, as "the civil war masked long-standing anti-Muslim sentiment" (DeVotta & Ganguly 2019:141) and "attacks on Muslim minorities are an extension of pre-existing oppression patterns faced by other minorities" (Stewart 2014:241). Sri Lanka's Muslims are more likely to be identified by their religion than their ethnicity, as compared to other ethno-religious groups in the country (Klem 2011). Much anti-Muslim rhetoric in recent years has focussed on issues of halal foods, forced marriage and religious conversions, high birth rates, and Islamic violations of Buddhist sanctity (Stewart 2014; Sarjoon et al 2016). There has been a disconcerting rise in hate-speech and anti-Muslim propaganda (Aliff 2015) positioning Islam as inimical to Sri Lanka's national and cultural integrity.

The war marginalised multiple aspects of Muslim displacement and victimisation, and their suffering in the conflict and their social position thereafter have not been sufficiently

acknowledged (Uyangoda 2007). The complex relationship between Islam and politics has generally suffered from a lack of integration with other scholarly works on Sri Lanka, which goes some way to explaining the divisions in the Muslim community, including their weakness to collectively confront enemies (Klem 2011): Buddhist extremists, political propaganda, or LTTE atrocities. Some observers had postulated that any Islamic fundamentalism that emerged would be a reaction to the oppression and forced relocation of Muslims by the LTTE during the war years (Deegalle 2006), yet the 2019 bombings did not target Tamils or LTTE proxies, except inasmuch that some Tamils are Christians.

McGilvray explores how the country's Muslims are in a difficult and divisive social position, caught between the "ethno-nationalist rivalries" (2011:45) of Sinhalese and Tamils on one hand, and doctrinal tensions in competing Islamic ideologies at the international levels. Recent years have seen a raised awareness of Sri Lanka's Muslims regarding the positionality of Islam globally, and also tensions within Muslim communities about Sufism and more fundamentalist ideologies such as Wahhabism. Despite this, Sri Lanka's Muslim communities have not produced any specific indigenous Islamic reformist movements (McGilvray 2011). Various tensions and complexities thus exist within Muslim communities and specifically regarding their identities in a pluralistic country like Sri Lanka, yet they are treated as a monolithic group by nationalist and religious extremists.

Despite their precarious social position domestically, there are numerous international Islamic networks working for human rights, political representation and advocacy.

Conversely, as Buddhist and Sinhalese nationalist groups maintain, there is an "absence of strong international allies for the Sinhalese" (Jones 2015:19) and they point to the prevalence of Muslim organisations globally. It is not the demographic realities in an imagined social group that sustain ethnic violence, but instead their connections to larger communities, whether real or imagined.

The seeds of Islamic extremism, while not immediately obvious or important to the country's security forces, had been festering for years, particularly in the Eastern part of the country (on the other side of the island from Colombo). The causal factors of Sri Lankan Jihadism were embedded in wider social complexities but were not sufficiently acknowledged or investigated by the state, by the security forces or by other ethno-religious groups. Muslim experiences of 'otherness' exist as an externally imposed set of identities, but also chosen self-identity. Their dress in Colombo for example, is now more visibly Arab influenced, particularly with women wearing hijabs and niqabs. This can easily feed into charges that Muslims have increased demographically in Colombo, purely because they are more visibly 'Islamic' rather than 'Sri Lankan' (Morrison 2019). A Buddhist monk explains, "20 years ago, Muslim women used saris, now only use black clothes. [Buddhist extremists] accuse them of creating a Middle Eastern environment."[3]

"The current trend toward Middle Eastern styles of dress and architecture now draws greater attention to the Muslims as a conspicuous social 'other' in the public sphere" (McGilvray 2011:60). The Muslim interviewees highlight how Sri Lankan Islam differs from Islam in Pakistan and Arab countries, but acknowledge the accusations that

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[3] Interview 5, Buddhist monk

Muslims seek to make Sri Lanka more like the Middle East, for example in the move away from traditional Lankan garments and spread of Arabic clothing. The view of Muslim communities as insular has been asserted by Buddhist extremists and nationalists but may instead be "a polarising consequence of the conflict" (Secretariat for Muslims 2014:np), a phenomenon that is of course not confined to Sri Lanka's Muslims.

Islamic organisations in Sri Lanka have no history of agitating for secession or territorial autonomy, unlike the LTTE. However, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, the President's brother, claimed in 2013 that the country was vulnerable to Muslim extremism and that Islamic extremists had been discovered (Reuters 2013) but gave no evidence or details for this claim. In any case, there was little or no monitoring or surveillance of these groups or individuals. Pre-2019, the relative risk posed by Islamic extremists in the country was difficult to ascertain with any accuracy, given the paucity of concrete data, the abundance of accusations and the security apparatus' focus on LTTE terrorism.

Anderson's (1983) concept of 'imagined communities' theorised the existence of socially constructed groups whose identity rests on their perceptions of being distinct from other social groups. The contested position of Islam in Sri Lanka is not only due to their self-imposed isolation, but is also a product of their victimhood resulting from media, government and Buddhist nationalist propaganda. The binary dynamics of ethnic tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils "essentially diminished the chance for a common national identity to develop" (Imtiyaz & Stavis 2008:6) with the result that the country's Muslims were further denied their sharing of a common national identity. For a small country, Sri Lanka has multiple nations within it. It is of course impossible to suggest that the Easter 2019 atrocities would have occurred without these social factors; Jihadi terrorism has occurred in many other countries that lack these specificities.

3.2. Interfaith activities

Much of the primary data used in this paper emerged from interviews and focus group discussions with religious actors about the potential for faith-based initiatives to contest Buddhist nationalism and build a more peaceful Sri Lanka. To this end, scholars should examine religion's functionality and social application to analyse its impact, rather than its claims or scriptural foundations (Johnson 2016). Religious contributions, and their impacts to peacebuilding have been neglected as areas of study (Smock 2006).

Abu-Nimer (2011) emphasises the symbolic contributions of interreligious organisations and initiatives to peace, even if they lack tangible impacts, as they present a counter-narrative to faith as a source of division and conflict. Rigorous study of the peaceful impacts of religious involvement in conflict resolution has only recently started (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana 2009), but in any case Sri Lanka's numerous conflicts at micro and macro levels resist any simplistic categorisation as definitively either ethnic or religious conflicts. Smock (2006:35) notes how "how complications arise when religious divisions overlap with and reinforce ethnic or racial divisions" when attempting interfaith peacebuilding. Sri Lanka's limited experience with peacebuilding activities over the years, and particularly its post-war reconciliation efforts, have not explicitly addressed the grievances of minorities (Aliff 2016) nor emphasised the contributions and influence of

religious actors, beyond a nationalist positioning of Sinhala Buddhism identity.

Svensson (2007) finds that inter-religious conflicts are no more intractable than conflicts whose belligerents belong to the same faith. He thus suggests interfaith dialogue (IFD) should not be considered a priority in peacebuilding efforts. IFD tends to mobilise actors who are already broadly in agreement, rather than reaching extremists or those at risk of extremism (Bouta et al 2005). Interfaith programmes often lack the self-critical enquiry and reflection necessary to develop convincing theories of change to demonstrate their impacts (Neufeldt 2011). Faith actors enjoy legitimacy and leverage (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana 2009), which are concepts referred to repeatedly by the interview respondents.

Interfaith work directly combats ideals identified by Mousseau (2003:27) as inherent to terrorist actors: "a lack of empathy for out-groups, an emphasis on community over the individual, and an incomprehension for objective truth and individual innocence". A pluralistic interfaith approach that emphasises tolerance and humanistic values is in direct opposition to religious conservatives who perceive such an approach as a threat (Bouta et al 2005).

Where Islamic extremism has been met with political repression and increased military activity, it has instead boosted popular support for extremist ideologies (Svensson 2007). Historically in Sri Lanka, Muslims and Buddhists enjoyed peaceful relations for centuries (Stewart 2014) with virtually no strife between them, unlike Sinhalese and Tamils (Ali 2013). The Catholic Church's "identity as a colonial implant traditionally associated with pro-Western conservative politics is central" (Johnson 2016:6).

Does IFD suffer from excessively high expectations? In theory, IFD incorporates intercultural sensitivity and conflict resolution concepts (Abu-Nimer 2011). When IFD fails, it reinforces the perception that religion has only a weak influence on peace processes. However, when it succeeds, it is assimilated by more visible and elite level negotiations (Neufeldt 2011). Either way, the overall impact of IFD for peace is uncertain, and suffers from political interference and machinations. Particularly where interfaith peacebuilding is linked with international interventions and humanitarian aid, the success record in Sri Lanka is very mixed (Cox et al 2014). Given the complexities of untangling interfaith peacebuilding from non-faith initiatives, more analytical breakdown and more evidence is required to demonstrate convincing theories of change and integrate political and economic elements in addition to the social cohesion aims of interfaith work.

3.3. Terrorism incidence

Democracies are under political pressure to take both preventative and responsive action of some kind against terrorist threats. However, they are severely constrained in the range of options they can take to combat terrorism (Enders & Sandler 2006) and the actions of their security forces (Lutz & Lutz 2007). Democracies often harbour politically excluded minorities whose politics and identities are overlooked in mainstream discourse (Eubank & Weinberg, 2001). Democracies have mass media that can unwittingly (or intentionally) assist in spreading propaganda (Enders & Sandler 2006) and hence assist in instilling fear in the public sphere. Jihadi terrorists wish to undermine the foundations of democracy not because they inherently hate democracy itself, but because they perceive it to be fundamentally unjust (Mousseau 2003). Jihadi terrorists target the international community for

its perceived support of corruption and autocracy; the 'West' and its proxies are therefore an easy enemy both to identify and to target (Kivimäki 2007). Sri Lanka's Christians, much as Christians in the Middle East, find themselves identified as symbols of the global political order.

The incidence of terrorism is predicted by levels of ethnic diversity, state repression and political structure (Piazza 2006). Islamic extremist violence occurs often when Muslims are a minority, but also in Muslim-majority countries where the extremists perceive themselves to be 'a minority'. Given that "Islamic culture has not developed its own indigenous normative division between the secular and sacred spheres" (Johnson 1997:16) then this lack of distinction may complicate efforts to revolve this dilemma within Muslim communities. There has been considerable demonisation of Islam in Sri Lanka by the media and mainstream political discourse (Sarjoon et al 2016). Among other impacts, this hinders the internal tensions facing Muslims as they navigate between different competing visions of their own religion and leaves them without allies domestically.

Atran's and colleagues' work on terrorist motivations and commitments are key here, particular the concept of the 'devoted actor' (Atran 2016): willing to protect important or 'sacred values' through sacrifice and extreme actions, even killing or dying, particularly when such values are integral to group identity. Sacred values are inviolable and are supported by actions beyond evident reason, disregarding calculable costs and consequences (Ginges et al, 2007). Actors motivated by 'sacred values' are seemingly invulnerable to external influence, compromise or negotiation. The behaviours of the Easter bombers indicate a willingness to die in pursuit of their aims, as observed in the vast majority of Jihadi-type mass atrocities. The 'devoted actor' argument challenges the role of grievance as a motivating factor in fomenting terrorist mass atrocities, and suggests that such actors are beyond the reach of any moderate religious doctrine or interfaith engagements.

3.4. Post-war environments and peacebuilding

Under President Rajapakse, the Sri Lankan state defeated the LTTE in 2009, after 26 years of civil war. Ethno-historical grievances, more than religious divisions, were a major factor in the causation of the war (Bouma, Ling & Pratt 2010). However, the LTTE was a secular organisation (Patterson 2013) and maintained ethnicity, not religion, as the fundamental basis for social divisions. Although the war was not primarily a religious conflict, post-war tensions have increasingly shifted from ethnic to faith-based (Svensson 2007). The ideology of a 'just war' is well elaborated in Islam and Christianity but also exists in Sri Lankan Buddhism, with the rationale that a certain level of violence is tolerable, permissible and even desirable to defend the faith (Frydenlund 2005; Bartholomeusz 2002). The various legacies of the conflict include inter-group mistrust, competition for political space and contested conceptions of what comprises 'the nation'. Furthermore, post-war reconciliation is a key aspect of preventing renewed conflict (Aliff 2016). Compared to countries such as Rwanda or South Africa, Sri Lanka's reluctance to comprehensively address conflict-related ethnic minority sufferings can influence the dynamics of future iterations of armed violence. In addition to the obvious cleavages between Sinhalese and Tamils, the war years deepened divisions between Tamils and Muslims, mainly due to the LTTE expulsion of around 75,000 Muslims from the

Northern territories in 1990 and the killing of hundreds of unarmed Muslims while they were praying (Patterson 2013). The deprivations many Muslims experienced, primarily during the war, have contributed to the erosion of their empathy regarding the suffering of others (Haniffa 2015).

Intergroup identity competition is a key causal factor in conflict genesis, rather than incompatible interests (Seul 1999) and the divisions between Buddhists and Muslims have likewise become more prominent in the post-war environment. Berkwitz (2003:61) presciently observed that "if Muslims find themselves subject to extortion and intimidation by the LTTE, while being generally neglected by the Sinhala-dominated Government, they may turn to transnational Islamic groups for support and advocacy". However, there is no evidence that the NTJ is anything more than an extremist fringe, and no indications that the organisation enjoyed any meaningful level of support from the Muslim community.

Sri Lanka's "culture of impunity… violence and the many war crimes have served to deepen the grievances held by all ethnic groups in the conflict" (Höglund & Orjuela 2011:30). During and following the war, Buddhist monks were notorious for attacking peace demonstrations, opposition political party rallies, Tamil groups and other minorities (Gravers 2015). Orjuela notes, "In Sri Lanka, conflicts and violence at a local level are in many ways interlinked with the larger-scale violent conflict" (2003:204). The war years, characterised by the psychological construction of 'the enemy' rationalised and justified killing and torture by the LTTE and the government (Barnes 2013). This produced "categories of superior and inferior human beings" (Ibid p.353) which has affected all ethno-religious groups in the country. The war and its legacies have thus left multiple types of grievance to express.

Many disparate peacebuilding activities in Sri Lanka during the war years were implemented top-down, in urban areas and in a fragmented manner (Orjuela 2003). They lacked a cohesive and sustained implementation, tended not to reach rural areas, and were weak at targeting youth. Certain social groups featured more prominently than others in the post-war environment. In particular, "the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from the peace talks" (McGilvray & Raheem 2007:48) was a major feature of the exclusionary post-war approach by adopted by the government. Post-war reconciliation discourse in Sri Lanka tends to only identify Sinhalese and Tamils as conflict actors (Aliff 2015) and overlook Muslims and other minorities. "The government has embraced international peacebuilding frameworks" (Cox et al 2014:iv), but only to show adherence to global norms, without undertaking any of the economic, structural or cultural reforms necessary for post-war social change (Aliff 2016). Since 2009, there have been virtually no top-down peacebuilding efforts, instead "a triumphalist, security-focused style of post-conflict celebrations built on Sinhalese Buddhist ascendancy" (Morrison 2019:14) which downplays the suffering of other groups during the war years and denies their voice in contributing to a pluralistic and multi-identity society.

4. Research methodology and data collection

In June 2014, a series of deadly ethnic riots in Sri Lanka's South West mostly targeted Muslims, their homes, properties and houses of worship. Following this, in August 2014 I

conducted 16 interviews with leaders and prominent activists of different faith organisations and two religiously-inspired NGOs engaged in peacebuilding and conflict transformation activities in Colombo and Galle. (It was too risky to attempt data collection in the actual areas affected by the riots). The interview respondents were representatives from Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism, and we also held a focus group discussion comprising 6 local faith leaders from Buddhism, Catholicism and Islam. The interviews were mostly in English, but a Sri Lankan field assistant translated from Sinhalese for some respondents. As the majority of faith groups in Sri Lanka are not overtly involved in post-war conflict transformation work, these interviewees tended to be more outspoken and less representative of the average religious leader. They comprise what Bouta et al (2005:13) label "the 'compassionate ones', or 'religious change agents'".

Full anonymity was given to each respondent, as several claimed to be at risk from extremists and the interview topics are highly politically charged. Names, ethnicities and organisations are not mentioned here, only religious affiliation. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. Notes from each interview were shared afterwards with respondents to check accuracy. The prompting questions focussed on:

- The roles and responsibilities of religious leaders and organisations for peacebuilding;
- Relations with the Government, media and other faiths;
- The influence and impact of Buddhist extremism and victimisation of Muslims;
- Challenges and future developments for peacebuilding and interfaith dialogue.

The most pertinent aspect of the data collection for this present paper is that it took place five years before the Easter 2019 bombings. The data was originally collected to form the basis of a previous research paper (Morrison 2019), and therefore the data collection for this present paper comes with some caveats. The original purpose of these interviews was to gain insights into the ethno-political environment in which the 2014 riots occurred and the contributions to peace of faith-based actors. However, the Easter 2019 bombings were on a scale of violence much worse than any mass violence since the end of the war in 2009. The 2014 interview data thus took on a new and heightened importance especially as some of the data had not been analysed and included in the 2019 paper.

To what extent can we draw parallels between Buddhist extremism and Islamic extremism, given that the death tolls are on such different scales? In light of the Easter 2019 bombings, much of what the respondents had discussed took on new relevance, and deserved another examination with the benefit of hindsight. The interviews address many issues that are pertinent and relevant to the 2019 attacks; the arguments and fears expressed by these religious leaders take on a heightened meaning and sense of urgency when viewed again in the context of the 2019 Easter bombings, as they contain many prescient and provocative ideas and deserved another process of analysis and contextualisation. I decided to use the remaining interview data as a basis to examine the 2019 attacks within the narrower framework of interfaith peacebuilding activities rather than only the post-war context and rise of Buddhist extremism. Much of the primary data in this paper is quoted directly from the interviews and focus group discussions from 2014.

This paper relies more on insights from Catholic priests than from Buddhist monks, compared to the previous research paper. It must be remembered that during the interviews, the form of religious extremism that appeared to be the major post-war threat to peace in the country was Buddhist, rather than Islamic. What is more shocking in retrospect it how accurately the interviewees perceived the ethno-religious tensions and conflict potentials, and how their fears of further religious violence proved to be well founded.

5. Results of the study

5.1. Religious identities and extremism in Sri Lankan Society

One of the principal claims emphasised by the interview respondents was that Sri Lanka's conflict history helped create the conditions for the 2014 ethnic riots that primarily targetted Muslims, and which became infamous for the involvement of Buddhist monks. Since the end of the war in 2009, Muslims have replaced Tamils as the greatest perceived threat to national security and social stability. This is reflected in political discourse and public narratives, much of it in the national media (Sarjoon et al 2016). The state's military victory to end the war sent an uncompromising message that blunt military force and aggressive rhetoric more effectively defeated the LTTE than negotiations, mediation or peace talks. This allowed the state to consolidate political power and strengthened its claims to be the sole protector of security and justice, with no requirement to acknowledge dissenters or the voices of minority groups. In this way, Sri Lanka's state authorities view the end of the war through a narrow conflict lens (Bopage, 2010), hindering possibilities for peacebuilding or meaningful interfaith dialogue.

Religious identity has become more prominent in Sri Lankan society[4] and this has engendered more interfaith activities, including among actors who traditionally avoided such initiatives. "It's easy to approach people through faith…Faith is one of main ways to mobilise and inspire people in Lanka."[5] A Catholic Priest claims, "the civil war was won but the conflict was not resolved… There is still conflict between ethnicities and faiths. Buddhism is not the cause, but in each faith has extremists"[6]. The ethnic majority feels like a minority and the minority groups need to be more aware of this[7]. "The silence of the majority is more harmful than the violence of the few."[8]

"Lanka has a lot of local level goodwill… It needs to promote constitutional protections for minorities, and actually implement [them]. Currently there is a lack of will to implement the law, for example for Muslims, even minor offences are punished. Police prosecute Muslims more and worse."[9] A Senior Buddhist monk[10] describes how "originally, in the Sinhalese vs. Tamil conflicts, Muslims were victims… Society is still infused with military thinking: violence is still part of

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[4] Interview 6, Catholic Priest

[5] Interview 6, Catholic Priest

[6] Interview 13, focus group discussion

[7] Interview 15, Catholic Priest

[8] Interview 13, Catholic Father

[9] Interview 9, Muslim scholar

[10] Interview 5, Buddhist monk

Lankan society… Government says they did reconciliation, but not really. Society still… holds impacts of the war".

During the war, any activities to promote peace were labelled pro-LTTE[11]. The concept of peace became associated in mainstream discourse with capitulation or compromise, or even with weakness in the face of the LTTE threat. Much of this narrative was led by nationalistic Buddhist monks, and there is a shortage of Buddhist monks able and willing to stand up for peace, or even who understand the concept of human rights[12]. This leads to a lack of mainstream criticism against extremist narratives, including from within the Sangha[13]. One faith NGO worker laments, "The main Lankan ethnic groups are divided and separate, socially and geographically with no chance to live/work together…. Local level people know the problems, but leaders and politicians don't know…. [we] need to work more with Muslim organisations."[14]

Government policy was fixated on the LTTE as a security threat, and Islam as a cultural and social threat. "The government's argument for this is the need for constant vigilance… to protect national security... create a 'threat' in the minds of the people."[15] One Catholic Father is openly critical: "The government benefits from interfaith strife to stay in power… We need a strong people's movement to promote pluralism, faith harmony and social justice. Politicians don't want peace

in Sri Lanka"[16]. Local politicians are often supportive of IFD and peacebuilding efforts. Local level and sub-national initiatives such as Inter Faith Dialogue Centre operate with no external funding and no central Gov support, yet report very good impact. However, national level politicians create divisions and benefit from divided communities, and there is a shortage of communal harmony initiatives from the top. Politicians interfere and disrupt peacebuilding activities[17]. "[For] big politicians… religion is nothing, just a front. They don't believe even though the people do… Interfaith conflict is exploited by politicians. As long as this happens, we cannot have proper interfaith dialogue."[18]

Some respondents draw linkages between the government, and the media in facilitating and even encouraging interethnic tensions for political gains. A Hindu preacher explains, "Currently there are interfaith tensions. Soon after war's end, people felt 'we are sick of war and don't want another one'. So people prefer peace... But now again this is changing. The media creates intercommunal hatred, and different faith leaders are racist, including Muslims… People started questioning what is happening now, and asking faith leaders… [and] asking questions about the Government: Are we moving towards conflict again? People are afraid."[19]

"Religion is politicised and political powers use religion to create divisions. A

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[11] Interview 13, focus group discussion

[12] Interview 16, Catholic Priest

[13] The monastic community of ordained Buddhist monks, and nuns in some countries

[14] Interview 5, Buddhist monk

[15] Interview 5, Buddhist monk

[16] Interview 16, Catholic Priest

[17] Interview 16, Catholic Priest

[18] Interview 15, Catholic Priest

[19] Interview 11, Hindu Priest

broken country is easier to rule… Under our noses, the trust between communities is broken. The media doesn't show the full story."[20] Claims a Muslim scholar, "the media is also involved in poisoning people's minds".[21]

As another minority group in Sri Lanka, Christians are more able to identify with Muslim concerns and perceptions[22]. One Catholic Father explains how he prioritises meeting Muslims, to encourage them to be more inclusive, for example to stop "demanding schools only for Muslims", but it is not easy[23]. He concludes, "We cannot let Muslims get isolated… [we] need to maintain connection with Buddhists, but *also* with Muslims."[24].

With hindsight, it is shocking to see the refusals of some Sri Lankan Muslims in 2014 to acknowledge the potential for extremist violence being perpetrated by their co-religionists. For example, one Muslim respondent[25] claims that the allegation was false that "Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba[26] had set up a centre in Lanka". He is worth quoting in full:

> *On 27 June 2009, the US Embassy in Colombo sent a report to the State Department, leaked by WikiLeaks [concerning Lashkar-e-Taiba]. USA also did not share this report with the Lankan Government... but it was shared with India [which] in turn followed up through its own intelligence apparatus, and shared with the Indian media, that Lashkar-e-Taiba operates in Lanka. India too kept it a secret instead of sharing with the Lankan Government... the story of extremist groups in Lanka was published in Indian media. [There are] many such allegations… I know this to be false though.*

5.2. Impacts of interfaith work

Domestic interfaith work historically overlaps with interethnic peace work, and has mostly involved linking people from the North, particularly Tamils, with Sinhalese from the South and East. This approach reflected the war-era divisions between Tamil-majority areas and the rest of the island, and now appears outdated; it does not accurately reflect the main inter-group tensions that now exist. An Islamic scholar[27] acknowledges "generally, Lankan Buddhist community is very tolerant, on a global scale… there are years of goodwill between minorities and Sinhalese… we need dialogue, and not to respond to extremist provocation, which will only make the problem worse."

Faith leaders tend to assume that *all* faith communities respect them, regardless what

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[20] Interview 13, focus group discussion

[21] Interview 9, Muslim scholar

[22] Interview 14, Catholic Priest

[23] Interview 14, Catholic Priest

[24] Interview 14, Catholic Priest

[25] Interview 9, Muslim scholar

[26] A significant Islamist terrorist organization, active across South Asia. It was founded in 1987 and is headquartered in Pakistan.

[27] Interview 9, Muslim scholar

religion they are affiliated with[28]. They "command respect among people, regardless of the actual faith"[29]. This influence brings with it responsibility: a Muslim preacher questions,[30] "as faith leaders we have responsibility to ensure peace, otherwise people afterwards will ask, why didn't you stop conflict? Why not promote peace?"

Pre-2009, Muslims were also victims of LTTE aggression, most notably the 1990 LTTE cleansing of Muslims in the Northern Province. Muslim respondents were generally more pessimistic about the possibilities for a peaceful Sri Lanka, an attitude which stems from the 2014 riots and Muslim victimisation more generally. Several Islamic umbrella organisations have emerged in recent years, to promote Muslims' rights and representation, and as a response to Buddhist extremism and prejudice[31]. Such organisations advise self-preservation and safety over pressuring the government or political agitation. There is little demonstrable influence on these Sri Lankan organisations from the Middle East, and they are much more a domestic phenomenon. For example, The National Shoora Council (NSC) was formed in 2012 as a response to continuous attacks and criticisms of Muslims and Islam. An Islamic cleric draws linkages between the war termination, and the victimisation of Muslims: "Such criticisms emerged suddenly, and weren't there before the end of the war… Sri Lanka was safe from such influence of accusations against Islam and Muslims, until after the end of the war."[32] Domestic fears of 'Islamification' and Islamic ideologies are influenced by global events. Buddhists point to ethnic cleansing of Christians in the Middle East,[33] anti-Buddhist violence in countries such as Bangladesh or the demographic changes in Indonesia and Afghanistan following Muslim invasions (Aliff 2015) to show a possible scenario of Sinhalese becoming a minority in their own homeland if the demographic growth of Muslims is not contained.

Sri Lanka lacks of a culture of open and unpartisan discussion, claims a Buddhist monk[34]. If someone puts forward a strong opinion, there is a tendency for people to believe he has a political agenda or is paid by some organisation. Interviewees indicate that it is challenging to promote the concept of mutual benefit or universal ideals, beyond and across disparate social groups. According to Muslim respondents, their own congregations are even more suspicious[35]. "IFD [is] sometimes met with suspicion- [people] thinking it's foreign agenda, politically sensitive."[36]

The strongest interfaith effects are seen when faith actors do not distinguish the faith of beneficiary groups[37]. IFD starts by first respecting the dignity and humanity of 'the

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[28] Interview 11, Hindu Priest
[29] Interview 10, Hindu Priest
[30] Interview 13, focus group discussion
[31] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[32] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[33] Interview 15, Catholic Priest
[34] Interview 3, Buddhist monk
[35] Interview 9, Muslim scholar,
[36] Interview 5, Buddhist monk
[37] Interview 6, Catholic Priest

other' and demonstrating that respect to them[38]. Respondents mention the need to get their own congregations on board before they engage with others. "Need to educate one's own people first and sensitise them before approaching others"[39]. One Islamic scholar claims[40], "we would actually support the development of Buddhism in Lanka, as most people in Lanka are not really very religious".

"The impact [of IFD] is hard to measure. People are frightened nowadays… Extremist groups are looking for people who come together [peacefully]"[41]. "[IFD] has to be sensitive about visibility. People are scared to come together, scared of being identified, facing consequences [from extremists]. [We] must bring trust, to reduce fear. But if extremists continue… people will be afraid."[42] A Hindu priest admits to being "pessimistic about peace between communities in near future. The trend is that there will be less peace."[43]

The Sri Lankan people live with significant levels of fear[44]. "We are a militarised country. We see tanks and army everywhere, but we don't realise it."[45] "Their presence helps control population. Don't need guns: uniform and presence is enough to send a message... This started after 2009."[46] Police

have ignored attacks on Muslim homes and shops[47]. After the civil war, there was some level of goodwill within society, but that has now evaporated[48] . "Politics needs to change. People are in fear. The root causes of conflict need to be addressed, politically…. People need to be free… free to oppose the ruling party."[49]

5.3. Limitations of interfaith activities

Interfaith work suffers from a variety of programmatic and ideological weaknesses. Faith groups tend to have weak management mechanisms, with limited monitoring, evaluation or impact assessments of their work, and an uncritical assumption that their activities are beneficial (Bouta et al 2005). Faith leaders tend to be urban, more educated and male dominated, despite the significant differences between urban and rural populations. Addressing poverty should be fundamental to interfaith peacebuilding work[50]. Poverty is an issue that cannot be addressed separately from conflict and which is more of an immediate priority for local people[51]. The interview respondents all broadly agree that Sri Lanka's four major faiths have the same fundamental ideals of peace and conflict

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[38] Interview 7, Buddhist monk
[39] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[40] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[41] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[42] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[43] Interview 10, Hindu Priest
[44] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[45] Interview 13, Focus group discussion
[46] Interview 5, Buddhist monk
[47] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[48] Interview 11, Hindu Priest
[49] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[50] Interview 14, Catholic Father
[51] Interview 13, Focus group discussion, Interview 14, Catholic Father

resolution, and that the current conflicts are not ideological or doctrinal. These faith leaders consider a small number of extremists from different religions to be responsible for mass violence, not whole communities.

Fundamentally, one major challenge they face is that interfaith work is not well known in Sri Lanka. Generally, there is tolerance (or ignorance) of other faiths, and people live in separate and distinct communities rather than mixing. "Local people mix, if they are called together [for IFD], but otherwise will generally be separate. They don't mind being together, but on their own, they wouldn't intermingle."[52]

Engagement in interfaith work faces the difficulty that: "people expect to get material benefits [from it], it takes time to realise the 'soft' advantages".[53] Faith leaders engage in interfaith and peacebuilding work and meet with each other, but this pattern is not replicated with their congregations[54]. The faith leaders claim success in diffusing violence and hatred: "Only calling the leaders, doesn't reach the people. They don't pass information or messages onto the people, [they] keep it to themselves. So [my organisation] prioritises local people's activities."[55] Several respondents refer to the disconnect between what religions preach, and what they actually deliver or how they act, and there is mistrust between faith leaders[56]: "We are too ceremonial, not practical enough."[57]

Within some faiths, individuals who work for IFD and peacebuilding are threatened by their own community[58]. But the concept and practice of IFD is fairly new in Sri Lanka, and people think co-existence is just faith leaders sitting together[59] without perceiving the wider picture: "people have to internalise what co-existence really means. As faith leaders, we didn't tell people in the past the importance of co-existence"[60]. Another Catholic Father says, "We ask people to join us to work for [social] transformation. But priests live comfortably, [we] use luxury vehicle etc. These priests are not ready to transform others"[61]. Furthermore, "the government [labels] the church people as LTTE if they work for social justice...They are trying to change the government who think they are against them. The Church is not ready for this struggle"[62].

Faith leaders' activities can be as modest as going to each other's houses of worship, joint visits to conflict affected areas, celebrating each other's festivals and eating together. Post-violent incidents, local people appreciate having visits from faith leaders of different faiths[63]. Immediate post-riot actions, like joint religious visits, generally have strong positive impacts and faith leaders are often

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[52] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[53] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[54] Interview 13, Focus group discussion
[55] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[56] Interview 7, Buddhist monk
[57] Interview 13, Focus group discussion
[58] Interview 10, Hindu Priest
[59] Interview 12, Catholic Priest
[60] Interview 12, Catholic Priest
[61] Interview 17, Catholic Priest
[62] Interview 17, Catholic Priest
[63] Interview 13, Focus group discussion

able to visit locations where violence has erupted[64]. Faith leaders appear to support the need for some degree of censorship. The mixed-faith focus group stated that a full report on the 2014 riots could lead to reprisal attacks and increase violence[65]. Multi-faith peace work has been threatened: "People are frightened nowadays in interfaith dialogue. Extremist groups are looking for people who come together."[66] A senior monk explains, "they realised that faith leaders don't trust each other. The objective is to remove suspicion… faith actors have legitimacy, can attract people… [but we were] branded as LTTE supporters, when working for peace during war"[67].

Compared to Churches, which are often well-established and present across the island, mosques are less well-established and more localised. In general, Christians have more international backing and institutional connections than Muslims in Sri Lanka. Christians tend to feel more secure and 'embedded' as an integral part of Sri Lankan society, in part due to a position of authority and influence that remains from colonial times and their better levels of English. In contrast, Muslim respondents report that Muslims have a tendency to engage less in inter-communal relations[68]. For example, the Inter Religious Peace Foundation was formed by Buddhists and Christians, with no participation from Muslims.

There is significant interfaith activity happening, particularly led by Catholics, but there is less involvement of Hindus and Muslims in interfaith peacebuilding. The respondents acknowledge that the importance of IFD and outreach has often been overlooked by Muslims[69], and its practice is generally new and unfamiliar to Sri Lankan Muslims[70], but following the end of the war, there was a significant increase in Muslim engagement in IFD. Some people do not want their leaders undertaking IFD, particularly Muslims[71]. "As a Muslim leader, some people in my community don't want me to work with other faiths"[72]. Despite Sri Lanka's small surface area, some areas are culturally isolated, such as the town of Sainthamaruthu, whose demographics are 100% Muslim. Sainthamaruthu is not reached by interfaith efforts. "[An Islamic organisation] is still weak at IFD, similar to the Muslim community as a whole. They realise its importance but it needs to be made more intense… The current dialogue between religions is inadequate and needs to be made stronger."[73]

A Catholic Father observes, "After [2014 riots], Muslims fear joining other minority groups… but they are moving towards solidarity… Muslims generally do not want to share other faiths' rituals, but there are exceptions… there are some working for interfaith and peace…. in Anuradhapura,

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[64] Interview 13, Focus group discussion
[65] Interview 13, Focus group discussion
[66] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[67] Interview 7, Buddhist monk
[68] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[69] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[70] Interview 9, Muslim scholar
[71] Interview 11, Hindu Priest
[72] Interview 13, focus group discussion
[73] Interview 9, Muslim scholar

Muslims [were] singing carols… in a Buddhist temple. But these are isolated cases"[74]. He continues, "We celebrate workers' Mass, on May Day. Even Hindus, Buddhists etc. Nobody feels alienated, use all languages, all sacred texts [sic], lyrics composed by non-Christians. But Muslims will not accept such a thing... We cannot even invite them. It's open to them, but they will not accept, because it's against Islamic teachings. But for other faiths- no problem, [they are] happy with the idea". A Senior Catholic Sister explains, "[we] met weekly for IFD… with main nine churches and other groups associated with Christian faith… [also] Buddhist and Hindu. Not so much with Muslims."[75]

Despite religious leaders' claims to be socially important, they admit that interfaith initiatives are not enough to combat propaganda, media and tolerance of anti-minority violence. Pro-peace individuals often have to keep a low profile.[76] "The Government spent a lot on war, but spent little on peace…. No recognition of reconciliation needs, people's grievances."[77] "The government [should] prevent further conflict… together with NGOs and civil society [and] faith actors… [in the] South African example, the government was involved in reconciliation, and was successful."[78]

Government policy discourages NGO activities such as peacebuilding, and new laws and restrictions against NGOs were introduced, although this has relaxed in recent years. "[the government] doesn't support in this way. No overt barriers, but the Government should be more involved. [Peace] should be a primary goal of the Government."[79]

6. Conclusion

Interfaith dialogue (IFD) is desirable for post-war social relations to repair structural divisions and allow for improved inter-group communications. But IFD does not engage extremists. The National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) or any extremist group could have carried out the Easter 2019 bombings even in the absence of any interfaith work. This highlights the need for robust security apparatus, inter-agency communications, and surveillance to be implemented *parallel* to local level peacebuilding and community cohesion efforts. There are demonstrable shortcomings in the Sri Lankan security apparatus and political infighting that hinder coherent and organised anti-terrorism policy. Interfaith dialogue, even if competently undertaken and supported by the government, demonstrates limited impact in contesting the ideologies of armed, organised and committed 'devoted actor' extremists. The interview respondents highlight the reluctance and social barriers limiting the involvement of Sri Lankan Muslims in interfaith activities. Although this phenomenon is changing, a lack of engagement with other faiths is both a product, and a cause, of the disenfranchised position and alienation of the country's Muslim minority. Particularly in post-war contexts, interfaith activities should be integrated with other elements of peacebuilding and social cohesion efforts.

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[74] Interview 15, Catholic Priest
[75] Interview 8, Catholic Sister
[76] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[77] Interview 5, Buddhist monk
[78] Interview 6, Catholic Priest
[79] Interview 6, Catholic Priest

Since the end of the war, Sri Lanka has emerged as a country experiencing a surfeit of victimhoods; highly contested, oppositional, and presented as zero-sum. Different ethno-religious groups have grievances to express, and perceive a lack of willing listeners. The concept of fear emerges repeatedly from the interview data and is repeatedly mentioned as a major aspect of modern Sri Lankan society. Different social groups are afraid, of the perceived 'other', of domestic and international threats, of a return to open conflict, of being overwhelmed demographically. The last decade has seen multiple post-war social developments, many of them a desirable move forward and positive for a country riven by ethno-religious hatreds and violence. The legacies of the civil war are various, and experienced by different groups in different ways: more limited social identity formulations, political parties with narrower mandates and nationalist ideologies that deny minorities an equitable place in a plural society. Under President Rajapakse, the government succeeded in terminating the war, a victory that eluded any previous administration for 26 years, but cemented into public discourse the idea that the LTTE, and by extension Tamils, were a group that could not be negotiated with, only destroyed (Barnes 2013). The interview respondents emphasise how this zero-sum thinking has persisted and become normalised; not only for the government but for non-state actors as well.

It is fascinating to uncover the similarities between Jihadis and Buddhist extremists. Beyond the discrepancies in the scale of their violence, they share perceptions of a global order that victimises them: the machinations of a world system that undermines their claims to nationhood and rightful belonging. Parallel to this is their shared perception of being unfairly treated;

denied their rightful position in their own country. One framework to examine the Easter bombings is through how global dynamics and disputes are interpreted and actualised at local level. Sri Lanka's Muslims suffered terribly during the war years particularly through LTTE expulsions and attacks, and following the war, at the hands of Buddhist extremists and mob violence. However, Christianity's position as a proxy for global patterns of dominance and subjugation, even while these are not evident in Sri Lanka, still positioned the faith and its adherents as the main targets of Islamic Jihad. NTJ could strike a blow against Christians in Sri Lanka as symbols of global hegemonic inequalities, connected ineffably to worldwide power structures, instead of targeting Tamil Hindus or Sinhalese Buddhists as revenge for war-era sufferings. Hardline Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka, and Islamic extremists globally, claim a Westernised, global order that isolates and punishes those ideologies and peoples that do not follow mainstream systems and conventions. Both groups repeatedly refer to global bias against them. A further similarity is their shared persecution of the country's Christian minority, although Sri Lanka's Muslims are not targetted by the Christians.

Despite the targeting of international hotels, most of the dead were Sri Lankans (215 out of 259). Sri Lanka's bombings thus link the international events and domestic tensions, but the local conditions do not in themselves constitute a necessary cause of mass atrocity. The 2019 bombings could have occurred even in the absence of civil war, anti-Muslim riots or ethno-political victimisation. As events have demonstrated in recent decades, Jihadi grievances are transnational and based on imagined 'sacred values' that outsiders find difficult to conceptualise, anticipate or respond to.

However the Easter bombings are contextualised, there are limited causal elements in Sri Lanka's existing ethno-religious strife to explain it. The 2019 massacres were not merely a reaction to Buddhist aggression, nor to anti-Muslim violence, nor to perceived Christian dominance, nor as a response to the Christchurch massacre, nor to LTTE aggressions during the war. Sri Lanka was identified by Jihadis as a soft target with inefficient security procedures, where an attack on Christians and international targets would be an attack on the global power structure. It was not merely a continuation of domestic ethnic violence and must be understood within the context of global movements and events, many of which make Muslims feel alienated and powerless. Their contested social position in Sri Lanka has many similarities with their social position globally. Deeper examinations of Sri Lanka's conflict dynamics may be a necessary aspect of uncovering how and why Islamic extremists were able to commit such a horrendous atrocity, but these are not in themselves sufficient causes.

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