

# The days after in Sri Lanka

It is important to focus on popular solidarities and commonalities, instead of yielding to insecurity



HARINI AMARASURIYA

The first reaction of disbelief after receiving news of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, with more than 350 now confirmed dead, has not dissipated. The emotions are reminiscent to what most of us felt when we first heard news of the 2004 tsunami. Sri Lankans are not unused to tragedy or shocks – we, after all, have lived with an ethnic conflict, two insurrections, riots, assassinations and constitutional coups.

Nor is the disbelief simply because the war had ended 10 years ago and we were somehow lulled into a state of peace and non-violence. Rather, like when the tsunami happened, it is simply impossible to make sense of what is happening. This is unprecedented, nothing like this has happened before and nothing that has happened before has prepared us for this.

As I obsessively search for and read the numerous live updates, reports, op-ed pieces and media analyses on the attack and talk to friends and colleagues, I am no closer to understanding what happened than I was on Sunday morning. And in this age of the 24-hour news cycle, status updates and instant sharing of feelings, information and thoughts, I long for the time to pause, to reflect, and to grieve, without interruption.

### The IS hand

On the day after the blasts, we were told that an organisation known as the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) was responsible for the attack and that several individuals have been arrested. All arrested so far have been Sri Lankan. On Tuesday, the Amaq news agency of the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attacks, and then a video was released of alleged bombers pledging allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Disturbingly, various members of the government have intimated that intelligence information had been available, but had not been communicated to those responsible for decision-making, including the Prime Minister.



Devastated, confused: A mourner at a mass funeral at St. Sebastian's Church, Negombo, on Tuesday. • GETTY IMAGES

What this is an obvious carry-over from the rift between the executive and legislative branches of government since the incidents of October 2018 is evident. The insouciance with which this is being discussed by government Ministers and officials shows an unbelievable lack of awareness, that far from making any party look good, this revelation reflects the sheer incompetence, inadequacy and arrogance of the government.

The immediate feelings of incoherent rage that many of us are feeling in response to this spectacular lack of leadership and spectacles in the country are easier to understand and analyse. The pettiness and immaturity of the leadership are all too clear. In this, what is going to be, an election year in Sri Lanka, perhaps we can even do something about it. But the rest is far more incomprehensible and harder to deal with.

Who are the NTJ? What are their local and global networks? How could they have found the resources and expertise to carry out such a well-coordinated attack of this magnitude? As evidenced by the remarkable promptness with which arrests have been made and locations of suspects and explosives found, the military and security apparatus that defeated the LTTE is still functioning.

To my knowledge, researchers who have worked on radical Islamist groups in Sri Lanka have not to date found any with the strength to carry out an operation of this scale on its own.

Certainly, small groups, espousing various causes, some highly inflammatory, have been noted, and in fact,

the NTJ had been reported for activities such as defacing Buddhist statues. But these were mainly seen as linked to local politics and the religious tensions that have been seen recently. There are many gaps in the story so far.

### The post-war fallout

But more devastating are the implications of this attack for Sri Lanka's post-war society. If international experiences are anything to go by, the response to such attacks has been increased levels of securitisation, surveillance and legal reforms aimed at strengthening the state and military apparatus. Sri Lanka has had a bitter experience of this in the past and what it has meant for ordinary people. Last year, a controversial Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) was placed before Parliament to replace the existing, draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Prior to this attack, many were working desperately for a simple repeal of the PTA, without it being replaced by the proposed CTA. This attack will make this effort very much harder.

Globally, there is plenty of evidence to show that widening socioeconomic inequalities, increasing economic precariousness and the concentration of power within a closed circle of global (and local) economic and political elites can sow the seeds of discontent, intolerance and terrorism. We also know well that no longer are incidents simply 'local' – already, the narrative of what has happened in Sri Lanka has been globalised and there are many agendas which are riding on it. As one anguished post on Facebook

noted, "we are no longer even allowed to name and interpret our own tragedies."

In Sri Lanka, we have been struggling, especially since the end of the war, but also from long before, to combat ethno-religious nationalisms, entrenched social injustice and a political establishment that is increasingly out of touch with the people. We have been struggling to find a language and political strategies that can offer an alternative vision for the people, to find leaders who can inspire hope rather than contempt and cynicism. This attack is a huge setback for all those efforts. It has unleashed the kind of fears and insecurities that are demanding shrill rather than measured responses. And waiting in the wings are those who are harking back to the myth of a more 'secure' past and offering a return to a 'strong' leader. So when we try to make sense of these events, it is also important to consider which groups will seek to gain political advantage in the days to come.

Difficult as it is, we must continue to be sceptical of the narratives of terror and counter-terror as the only explanations and responses to what is happening. The conditions for extremism are within our own homes and communities. It must be countered not by suspicion and hate but by securing our relationships and challenging extremism in all its forms. Fear and insecurity are producing panic-stricken responses and a strengthening of anti-Muslim sentiments rather than a focus on our solidarities and commonalities.

It is important, therefore, to hold on, with all our hearts, to images and news of the winding lines of people wanting to donate blood at the National Blood Transfusion Service, the groups of people who are organising vigils in their homes and communities, visiting the bereaved and the injured, offering whatever comfort and support they can. The coming together of strangers in the most unexpected of ways to help each other and the grief (not anger) on the faces of people are indications that neither the attacks nor the dominant narrative being offered reflect the 'true' character, resilience and ethos of Sri Lanka and its people.

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# Taking advantage of BRI

The China-led initiative's global reach signals the advent of a new order led by Asia, which cannot exclude India



MUKUL SANWAL

There are at least five reasons why India should have sent an observer to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Forum that begins in Beijing on April 25.

First, the defining feature of the 21st century is that Asia, not China, is at the centre of the world. The BRI is part of a transformation triggered by colonialism and industrial capitalism from the 1840s and influenced by the UN institutions and global rules from the 1950s. Of the estimated \$30 trillion increase in middle-class consumption growth estimated by 2030, only \$1 trillion is expected to come from Western economies and most of the rest from Asia. China's population is nearly one-third of the total population of Asia but by 2050 its population of working age will shrink by 200 million people while in India the working-age population will increase by 200 million. Asians are not subscribing to a "China-led Asia", which would imply returning to the colonial order.

Second, the global spread of the BRI signals the political end of the old order where the G7 shaped the economic agenda. Italy, a member of the G7, is joining the BRI, despite the publicly voiced objection of the U.S., just as Britain joined the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015. Asians are gravitating to the new as it better meets their needs, not because the old is crumbling.

### Meeting infrastructure needs

Third, the Asian Development Bank, not China, drew global attention to infrastructure as the key driver of economic growth in Asia and the financing gap of \$26 trillion. The most visible feature of the BRI is the network of physical and digital infrastructure for transport, energy transmission and communications, harmonised with markets for advanced manufacturing and innovation-based companies.

Two-thirds of the countries funded by the initiative have sovereign debt ratings below investment grade, and their being part of supply chains is a catalyst for growth. A recent analysis identified only eight out of 68 countries at risk of debt default, which does not affect the overall viability of the \$3 trillion reserves of China for potential investment. There are cases of excess debt, political corruption and policy shifts following change in governments but overall the BRI remains popular. For example, Nepal has

just chosen the Chinese gauge over the Indian one for its rail network.

Fourth, the BRI, faced with criticism over lack of transparency and insensitivity to national concerns, is evolving towards standards of multilateralism, including through linkages with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The International Monetary Fund describes it as a "very important contribution" to the global economy and is "in very close collaboration with the Chinese authorities on sharing the best international practices, especially regarding fiscal sustainability and capacity building". China is now also seeking co-financing with multilateral institutions as well as private capital for a Silk Road Bond.

Fifth, for the BRI to have strategic objectives is not unusual. The Marshall Plan in the 1950s also required recipients to accept certain rules for deepening trade and investment ties with the U.S. Chinese control over supply-chain assets like ports provides the ability to project naval power, which will however remain minuscule compared to that of the U.S. – comprising 800 overseas bases. The BRI's commercial advantage has certainly increased China's international weight and India needs to shape the new standards to benefit Indian technology companies.

India's China dilemma, as it ends its ambivalence towards China, revolves around assessment of the extent the Asian giants need each other for the Asian century. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has declared a cooperative vision of the 'Indo-Pacific', contrary to the containment-based view of the United States. China also recognises the difficulties inherent in the interlinked international and domestic agenda of the BRI, and needs India's support for reform of global governance, which was an important part of last year's discussion at Wuhan.

India should respond to the strategic complexity arising from the BRI, a key part of which cuts through Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, through three related but distinct diplomatic initiatives.

First, India needs to highlight that a British-led coup by the Gilgit Scouts led to Pakistani occupation of this territory and seek appropriate text recognising India's sovereignty – a drafting challenge but not an insurmountable one.

Second, New Delhi should give a South Asian character to the two BRI corridors on India's western and eastern flanks, by linking them with plans for connectivity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. Third, India needs work towards 'multilateralising' the BRI with a set of rules.

Mukul Sanwal is a former civil servant and UN diplomat

## SINGLE FILE

# Revisiting the Emergency

Gyan Prakash's book on the turbulent period comes at an opportune moment

MOHAMMED AYOUB



The BJP election theme slogans *phir ek baar Modi sarkar* and *Modi hai to mumkin hai* have echoes of "Indira is India" – the slogan raised by acolytes of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in the 1970s. That catchphrase encapsulated the spirit of the Emergency that she imposed in 1975.

It is commonly assumed that the Emergency was "a momentary distortion in India's proud record of democracy," to quote historian Gyan Prakash from his recently-published book, *Emergency Chronicles*.

In a few sentences which form the kernel of his argument, Mr. Prakash refutes this simplistic notion. He argues that, "The battle was not new; the blows were not the first. Critics in the Constituent Assembly had repeatedly raised voices against emergency powers and the elimination of due process. But the constitution drafters working amid the turmoil of Partition had successfully argued that the fledgling state's executive needed extraordinary powers without judicial interference to deal with exceptional circumstances."

The roots of the Emergency, Mr. Prakash argues, can be traced to these "extraordinary powers". He locates the origins of the Emergency especially in the decision of the Constituent Assembly, despite vigorous opposition, to replace the phrase "due process" with "procedure established by law" in Article 21 of the Constitution, which in its final form read: "No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." This left it to the whims of lawmakers to decide the procedure to be followed.

The imposition of the Emergency was related not only to the existence of extraordinary powers provided in the Constitution but also to the failure of Mrs. Gandhi's populist rhetoric, including the *garibi hatao* slogan, to buy her rule legitimacy. A groundswell of opposition led by Jayaprakash Narayan to her increasingly arbitrary governance threatened to upend her rule. The Allahabad High Court judgment merely acted as the proverbial last straw.

There are important lessons that can be drawn from the experience of the Emergency that are applicable to the current situation in India. Draconian laws curbing Fundamental Rights, including the provision for preventive detention and the colonial-era sedition law, continue to remain on the books. Additionally, populist rhetoric, including the dubbing of Opposition politicians as "anti-national" and the use of national security issues for electoral gain, reminds one of the 1970s. In *Emergency Chronicles*, the analysis of the roots of a turbulent period in Indian post-colonial history comes at an opportune moment to help us understand the constitutional and historical background of that episode. More important, it acts as a warning against the danger of arbitrary rule that the country faces at a time of excessive polarisation not witnessed since the 1970s.

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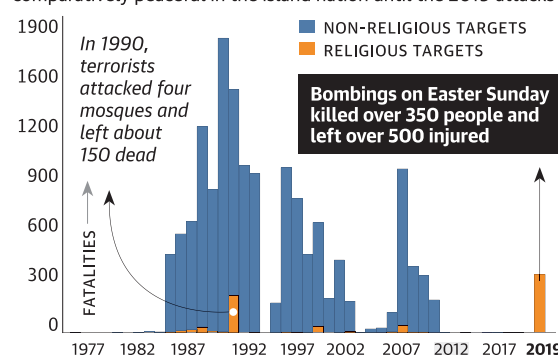
## DATA POINT

# Agents of terror

The Easter terror attacks in Sri Lanka followed an unusual pattern. The bulk of the attacks in the past did not feature religious targets. Worldwide, terror attacks, even those claimed by the Islamic State, on religious sites were lower in number compared to those on targets such as government and military installations. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan & Varun B. Krishnan

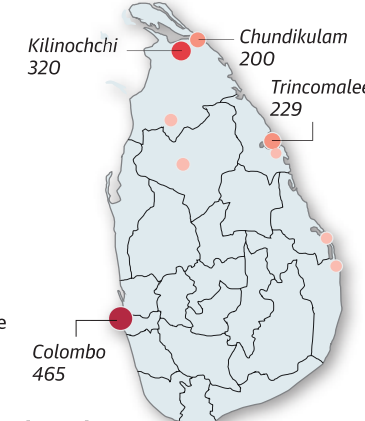
### The storm after the lull

Data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) show that fatalities from religious targets were a small number compared to other targets in Sri Lanka, with the past two years being comparatively peaceful in the island nation until the 2019 attacks



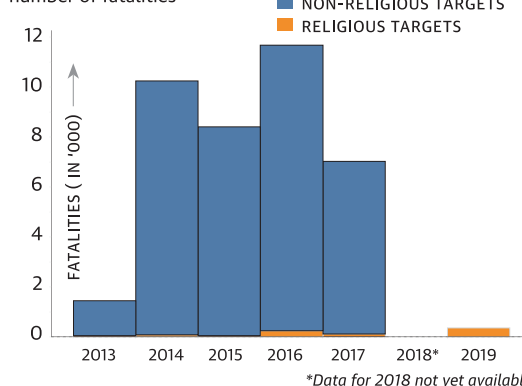
### Capital bears the brunt

GTD data show that Colombo has suffered the highest number of fatalities in terrorist attacks since 1970, while the northern city of Kilinochchi and the north-eastern city of Trincomalee are second and third on the list



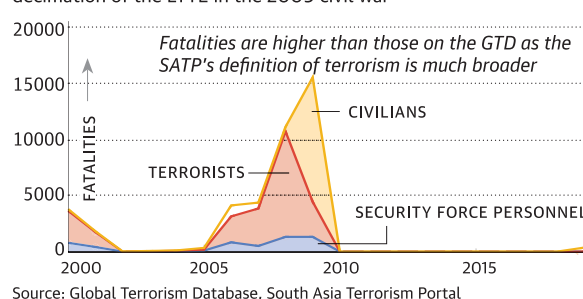
### Fewer religious targets

GTD data show that globally, attacks by the Islamic State on religious targets form a small fraction of the overall number of fatalities



### Peace following the civil war

Data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) show that there were very few casualties from terrorist violence after the decimation of the LTTE in the 2009 civil war



## FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 25, 1969

### Jan Sangh wants review of States reorganisation

The Working Committee of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, meeting here [Bombay] for the third day to-day [April 24], adopted a resolution on the "internal situation" stating that the time had now come for the constitution of a second States Reorganisation Commission, particularly with a view to removing regional imbalances and reconciling regional aspirations with the paramount needs of national unity and security. The resolution felt that the Telengana agitation had highlighted the fact that the demands of economic development could override the forces of linguistic unity. The Jan Sangh wanted that all pending border disputes also be referred to the Commission. The Committee suggested in the resolution that the Commission's recommendations should be in the nature of a binding award, and that not even Government should be entitled to change them. The resolution referred to reports both from Kerala and West Bengal and said that the Communists in office were not in the least concerned about solving the problems of these States or using the administration as an instrument of service.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 25, 1919

### Legal Profession Memorial.

The members of legal profession at a meeting last night [April 16, in Bombay] resolved to prepare and submit a memorial to the Secretary of State for India in Council urging him to advise His Majesty the King-Emperor to signify his disallowance of the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, which is subversive of the fundamental principles of British Justice. Mr. F.S. Tadyerkhan, Bar-at-Law, who presided at the meeting said they were intimately connected with the administration of justice and after carefully studying this particular act had come to the conclusion that it was a most deplorable piece of legislation, and it added one more act to the armoury of coercive legislation, which unfortunately the Government had been manufacturing for the last few years unwisely and unnecessarily. They were against the legislation because their experience told that a legislation of that kind failed entirely in its object and never failed to create distrust and alarm and shake the confidence of the people in British justice.

### POLL CALL Booth slip

If a citizen has a Voter ID but her name is not on the electoral roll/voters list, she will not be allowed to cast her vote. A voter slip or booth slip is an identification document issued to a citizen before an election, which confirms that her name is on the electoral roll. Booth slips are issued by the Election Commission of India and can be downloaded online. However, if a voter is not carrying her booth slip, she need not worry – at the polling booth, election officials, who have a list of the voters, also have copies of their booth slips and voters can take their slips from them.

### MORE ON THE WEB

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern speaks in Sri Lanka Easter Sunday bombings

<https://bit.ly/2ZsxnWJ>