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Commentary: Thoughts on the New Zealand and Sri Lanka Attacks

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Back in the 1990s, Samuel P. Huntington hypothesized that there would be a global ‘clash of civilizations’ between dominant world cultures, in response to Francis Fukuyama’s analysis of global trends.¹ These generated much intellectual debate – agreements and disagreements. Yet doubtless the frequency and scale of ‘radical’ Islamist attacks and anti-Islam counterattacks have been increasing.

Terrorist attacks attributed to Islamist extremists have included:² In France, Jewish synagogues in Paris on October 3, 1980 (4 dead, 26 injured); Chez Jo Goldenberg café, August 9, 1982 (6 dead, 22 injured); the office of Charlie Hebdo publication on January 7-9, 2015 (20 dead, 22 injured); multiple attacks across Paris, including on the Bataclan theatre on November 13-14, 2015 (137 dead, 413 injured); the truck attack in Nice on July 14, 2016 (87 dead, 434 injured); in Carcassonne and Trebes on March 23, 2018 (5 killed, 15 injured); in Strasbourg on December 11, 2018 (6 dead, 11 injured)...In Belgium, the attacks in Brussels on March 22, 2016 (35 dead, over 300

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injured)...In Germany, the truck attack on a Christmas market in Berlin on December 19, 2016 (12 dead, 48 injured)...In England, Westminster Bridge in London on March 22, 2017 (6 dead, at least 50 injured); Manchester arena on May 22, 2017 (23 dead, 139 injured); London Bridge on June 3, 2017 (11 dead, 48 injured)...In Canada, Zehaf-Bibeau's attacks in Ottawa on October 22, 2014)...In the United States, the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 (more than 3,000 dead and 6,000 wounded); the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013 (5 dead, 183 wounded); San Bernardino, California on December 2, 2015 (14 dead, 22 injured)...This is a selective list – there have been innumerable lesser attacks in Europe and North America, as well as many attacks in other countries.

Meanwhile, the so-called 'alt-right' terrorists have countered with – or initiated – their own attacks, which have been fewer and often carried out by 'radicalized' individuals: In Norway, on May 15, 2009 Anders Behring Breivik – inspired by neo-Nazis, eco-fascists, Odin's Cross and ethno-nationalists seemingly opposed to liberal views of open immigration – detonated a bomb in downtown Oslo (killing 8 and wounding 209), then attacked a labour party youth camp on Utøya island (killing 69 and injuring 110). In Canada, the Islamic Cultural Centre in Quebec City was attacked on January 29, 2017 by Alexandre Bissonnette (6 died, 19 were injured). In England, the Finsbury Park mosque in London was attacked on June 19, 2017. Evidently, both radicalized Muslims and self-defined 'alt-right' terrorists have engaged in violent anti-Semitism: on October 27, 2018 one of the latter attacked a synagogue in Pittsburgh (killing 11 and wounding 7). Then most recently, again a 'lone wolf' attacked Muslim centres in normally very peaceful Christchurch, New Zealand on March 15, 2019.

The Christchurch attacks were carried out by Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a 28-year-old Australian, enamoured of white supremacy and 'alt-right' extremism. Inspired by ethnic cleansing in the Balkans (particularly Radovan Karadzic and Serbian ethnonationalism leading to Bosnian genocide), he had donated to 'Identitarian' movements in Austria (Identitäre Bewegung Österreich) and France. He was obsessed with terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists during 2016-17 and inspired by the Breivik attacks in Norway and the Quebec City attack. First he videotaped his attack on the Al Noor mosque, then proceeded to the Linwood Islamic centre. His victims (51 killed, another 77 wounded)³ ranged in age from small children to elderly, and represented the extraordinary diversity of New Zealand Muslims – they originated in the Middle East (Jordan,

Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq), South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan), Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia), the South Pacific (Fiji), and the Indian Ocean (Mauritius).

Small numbers of Muslims had lived in New Zealand since the early 1900s – there were 15 mosques by 1959. Yet, the Muslim population did not begin to increase substantially until the 1970s, and in larger numbers with the arrival of refugees during the 1990s. They concentrated in Auckland. Primarily Sunni, a substantial minority were Shia, while Ahmadis constructed the largest mosque. Interestingly, Christchurch hosted a conference for indigenous Maori converts to Islam.

Presumably in retribution for the Christchurch attacks, Muslim extremists in Sri Lanka launched a series of attacks on churches and tourist hotels on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019. Three Catholic churches were attacked in Negombo, Kochichikade in Colombo, and Batticaloa, as well as four tourist hotels in Colombo – ostensibly targeting ‘citizens of coalition countries’ (fighting ISIS) and Christians in Sri Lanka. Altogether, an estimated 290 died and over 500 were wounded.⁴ The perpetrators of these attacks belonged to National Thowheed Jama’ath, an extremist Islamist group which had become increasingly influenced by Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism. While the suggestion that returning ISIS fighters were responsible for the attacks may be unfounded or exaggerated, the attacks were praised by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the long-time evasive ISIS leader.

It is especially surprising to analysts of ethnic/religious conflict in Sri Lanka that radicalized Muslims would choose to attack Christians – two lesser minorities within the complex national population. Sri Lanka has endured a long history of conflict – in fact outright warfare – between the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and minority Hindu Tamils.⁵ The initial insurgency of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (controversially advocating a separate state of Tamil Eelam within Sri Lanka, claiming territory in the northwest coast, north and east coast which was in fact not completely Tamil/Hindu) in 1983 resulted in virtual civil war, a military occupation by India in 1987,⁶ continued warfare after 1990, an ineffective ceasefire in 2002, progressive consolidation of separatist territory after 2006 and final surrender in 2009. Between 1983 and 2009, an estimated 100,000 died and 800,000 were displaced. So, to say the least, Sri Lanka has experienced decades of civil strife – but mainly between Sinhalese and Tamils.

The total population of Sri Lanka has grown from 14.8 million in 1981 to 20.3 million in 2011.⁷ While the Sinhalese population has similarly grown, from 10.9 million to 15.2 million, their proportion of the national population has not (73.9% to 74.9%). Again, Buddhists numbered 10.2 million (69.3%) in 1981, 14.2 million (70.1%) in 2011. Buddhists comprise a strong majority in most of Sri Lanka, except in the north, northwest coast and east coast.

Tamils (predominantly Hindus) have traditionally been divided between what are called ‘Sri Lanka Tamils’ (who have lived in Sri Lanka for centuries) and ‘Indian Tamils’ (imported into Ceylon as tea plantation workers during British colonialism). Approximately a quarter of Tamils in Sri Lanka are identified as ‘Indian Tamils’. They are considered second-class citizens – if citizens at all⁸ (reminiscent of the Rohingya situation in Myanmar). In an effort of the postcolonial, independent government to dilute the Tamil population, in 1964 over 300,000 Indian Tamils were deported to India; subsequently 200,000 were granted Indian citizenship. Only 75,000 were recognized as Sri Lanka residents – but not citizens. Finally, through the 1990s until 2003, most Indian Tamils became citizens of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Tamils (officially defined) increased from 1.8 million in 1981 to 2.2 million in 2011, but decreased from 12.7% to 11.1%. Indian Tamils numbered 818,000 in 1981 and 839,000 in 2011, but declined from 5.5% to 4.1%. Indian Tamils remain concentrated in the Central Province (where Hindus actually form a slight majority (51.1% in 2011) in Nuwara Eliya District); whereas Sri Lanka Tamils are concentrated in the north (in 2011 Hindus comprised 82.9% in Jaffna District, 82.5% in Kilinochchi District, 75.7% in Mullaitivu District, and 69.6% in Vavuniya District) and east coast (64.6% in Batticaloa District, 25.9% in Trincomalee District, and 15.8% in Ampara District).

Just as Tamils in Sri Lanka have historically been divided into two types, so, too, have Muslims.⁹ Most Muslims identify as ‘Ceylon or Sri Lanka Moors’. Mostly Sunnis traditionally speaking a Moorish Tamil dialect, they are descended from Arab traders who crossed the Indian Ocean to settle in India. Yet a minority of Muslims identify as ‘Malays’, descended from Southeast Asian Muslims (Malays or Indonesians) originally introduced to Ceylon through Dutch colonialism. They traditionally speak Malay (Bahasa Melayu). Smaller numbers are identified as ‘Indian Muslims’ or ‘Indian Moors’; they have included migrants from Kerala and Tamil Nadu, Sindhi Sunni Memons, Bohras from northern India and Pakistan, and Shia Khojas from Gujarat.

The overall Muslim population of Sri Lanka has almost doubled since 1981 (from 1.1 million to 1.9 million), increasing proportionately (they constituted 7.5% in 1981 and 9.6% in 2011). Specifically, Moors increased from 1.0 million (7.0%) in 1981 to 1.8 million (9.3%) in 2011, whereas Malays actually decreased from 46,000 (0.3%) in 1981 to 44,000 (0.2%) in 2011. Although proportionately still a relatively small minority, generally Muslims are concentrated in the Eastern Province (in 2011, 43.6% in Ampara District, 42.1% in Trincomalee District, 25.5% in Batticaloa District), along the northwest coast (20.0% in Puttalam District, 16.7% in Mannar District), and in major cities (14.3% in Kandy and 11.8% in Colombo – especially the Pettah neighbourhood east of the city centre). Small pockets of Muslims are found beyond these areas, such as at Beruwala on the southwest coast (Kechimalai mosque is the site of the first recorded Muslim settlement in 1024) and Malays at Hambantota on the south coast.

A high proportion (85%) of Christians in Sri Lanka are Catholics, while Anglican churches were established during the British colonial period. Back in 1891, Christians comprised about 10% of the population of Ceylon; they formed 7.6% in 1981 and 2011, but have increased modestly from 1.1 million to 1.5 million. Christians in Sri Lanka have diverse origins: depending on where they live, they may be Sinhalese or Tamil-speaking and include Burghers (Eurasians partly of Portuguese, Dutch, or British origin) who have numbered approximately 38-39,000, comprising about 0.2% of the Sri Lanka population since 1981. In 2011, Christians were particularly concentrated along the west coast north of Colombo (they formed 57.4% in Mannar District, 32.8% in Puttalam District, and 21.2% in Gampaha District around Negombo, yet just under 10% in Colombo); they also formed a substantial minority (between 11.3% and 16.0%) in the northernmost districts.

While the recent history of Sri Lanka has been dominated by conflict between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils, with relatively limited friction between or involving other ethno-religious groups, this may be fast changing. In February and March 2018, anti-Muslim rioting occurred in Ampara and Kandy Districts; mosques and other properties were attacked and vandalized – not by Christians (who have long advocated moderation) but by militant Buddhists.

Doubtless both these attacks on churches by Islamist extremists and attacks on mosques by militant Buddhists may seriously alter the status quo. The national government immediately responded by ordering the temporary closure of both mosques (fearing counterattacks) and churches (protecting

Christians from further attacks). On June 12, 2019 St Anthony's church in Negombo, which dates from 1740, was restored and re-consecrated by the Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Ranjith, who prayed for a national leader with a 'backbone who will not protect the guilty'. The government also censored the Salafist movement, and has been attempting to track down and raid potential terrorist cells. Senior police officers have been dismissed. There is increased danger of public recriminations against Muslims (not necessarily by Christians).

Sri Lanka has often been described by social scientists as a classic case of ethnic bipolarization.¹⁰ In such a situation, typically extremists claiming to represent one or the other faction (ethnic or religious group) initiate acts of violence which almost inevitably result in a violent response from the attacked faction. Yet extremists seldom actually represent the majority opinion of their faction, at least initially; so the whole point of committing violent acts – terrorism – is, in their view, to persuade the more moderate majority to side with them, taking a more decisive confrontational stance. Extremists have attacked not only the opposing faction or ethnic/religious group but also moderate members of their own group. With escalating violence, moderation steadily becomes alienated.

In the case of Sri Lanka, ethnic/religious bipolarization dominated over national unity based on at least minimal mutual toleration.¹¹ In the longstanding conflict between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils, where do the other ethnic/religious groups (Muslims, Christians, Burghers, indigenous Veddahs, and others) fit into the national composition? The ethnic/religious complexity of Sri Lanka can hardly be overstated. Even for moderates, it has been particularly problematic that if Tamil Eelam – the claimed traditional territory of Sri Lanka Muslims (exempting Indian Tamils) – were to be granted regional autonomy (i.e. short of complete independence), where would this leave the Muslims who constitute substantial localized concentrations (even outnumbering Tamils in certain communities) within this territory?¹² As if this isn't complicated enough, the current emergent potential conflict between Muslims and Christians adds immeasurably to the confusion. Again, only the voices of moderation – advocates not of violence and reprisals but of understanding and respect – would need to be strongly heard.

Following terrorist attacks – more than in anticipating them – politicians and community leaders have expressed their resolution to eradicate such violence. Yet they have had less to say

specifically about just how this should be accomplished. So let me conclude with what should seem to be rather obvious points.

First, it is hard – if not actually impossible – to prevent such attacks. Granted, police can – and do – attempt to keep track of potentially violent groups whose aims may be well-known. Yet clandestine cells may be very difficult to locate, as they may be mobile. Moreover, it is most difficult to find, much less to anticipate the actions of, ‘radicalized’ individuals who are out to make a name for themselves or to be martyred for some distorted cause. They often become radicalized not through membership of extremist groups as much as through the postings of such groups’ beliefs on the internet (now – very recently – there is a movement to prevent such racism on the internet and Facebook – how effective this may be remains to be seen).

Evidently it takes very few self-proclaimed or would-be imagined terrorists to create a great deal of havoc and public fear and anger. Yet extremists like proclaiming their ‘just’ causes. They are only partially clandestine – rather, they like attention: ‘radical’ Muslims as martyrs for types of Islam rejected by mainstream Islam, ‘alt-right’ as defending what they view as ‘the white race’ (however that may be defined). Today, unfortunately, political populism in Europe and the United States comes close to accepting such views and opposing immigrants and refugees, seen as diluting the presumed traditional homogeneity of historic national populations.

Lastly, education could be far more effective a means to contain, if not eliminate, violent terrorism, but it takes time and deliberate effort. People – all people – need to be taught to be moderate, to be welcoming of international migrants, to recognize, accept and promote ethnic diversity within national unity, to be respectful and, better yet, appreciative of increasing diversity. The response of the New Zealand government to the Christchurch attacks has been inspirational. But in too many countries – now, again, in Sri Lanka – this is hard to accomplish – but the alternative seems unimaginable.

Notes

¹ See Fukuyama (1992), Huntington (1993 and 1996).

² Data on number of deaths and injuries in these attacks may vary according to initial and later counts. Data cited here are from latest estimates (counting perpetrators as well as victims, and those who later died in hospital).

³ Almost all were killed or wounded in the first attack on the Al Noor mosque; only 3 died in the Linwood Islamic Centre. Data include 2 who died later in hospital.

⁴ Again, there has been variation in initial and later counts. Data cited here are latest estimates.

⁵ Among many sources which have analyzed the roots of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, Tambiah (1986) has described the genesis of the conflict in the riots of 1958 and 1983 and the emergence of Sinhalese ethnonationalism during the post-colonial period. A. Samarasinghe (1990) has explained the dynamics of Tamil separatism.

⁶ For a discussion of this period, see Vaidik (1986).

⁷ The ensuing demographic data on the Sri Lanka population, populations by religion and geographical distributions have been drawn from the censuses of 1981 and 2011 in order to determine demographic trends.

⁸ Indian Tamils in the colonial plantation system and their disenfranchisement have been described by Dawood (1980); Fries and Bibin (1984); and Thondaman (1986).

⁹ Mohan (1985) has provided a description of the historical background and demographic trends of Muslims in Sri Lanka to the 1980s.

¹⁰ An early source comparing 'ethnically bipolar states' was Milne (1981).

¹¹ A moderate viewpoint aimed at respectful understanding within national unity was exemplified in the Sri Lanka Foundation (1982).

¹² A detailed geographic analysis was provided by V. Samarasinghe (1988) and de Silva (1990).

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