

Risk of religious conflict in Sri Lanka increases

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The April 2019 terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka focused attention on the unresolved communal tensions affecting the country. *Derek Henry Flood* examines the complex ethno-linguistic and religious divisions that are likely to shape the risk of further violence, potentially between Muslim and Buddhist communities

Key Points

- Ten years after the end of Sri Lanka's civil war, there is little sign of any reconciliation between Sinhalese and Tamil communities, although a return to Tamil militancy is unlikely.
- Reconciliation efforts also failed to extend to the country's linguistically Tamil Sunni Muslims, who are increasingly defined by their religious identity, creating the potential for radicalisation.
- Multiple sources consulted by *Jane's* saw an increasing risk of conflict between Tamil-speaking Muslims and Buddhists from the ethnic-majority Sinhalese community.

Co-ordinated suicide improvised explosive device (IED) attacks targeting churches and hotels across Sri Lanka killed at least 253 people on 21 April. The attacks were the worst the country has suffered since the end of the 26-year civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, and occurred almost precisely a decade after the end of that conflict.

For three weeks from early March to mid-April, but before the suicide attacks took place, *Jane's* visited Sri Lanka for research and to assess socio-political dynamics ahead of the 10th anniversary of the end of the war. The conflict ended in a unilateral military victory, rather than a negotiated settlement between Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE. *Jane's* fieldwork found clear evidence that ethnic tensions and inter-religious chauvinism remained rampant in Sri Lanka, and that varying degrees of distrust are embedded into ethno-linguistic identity politics.

Sinhalese and Tamil attitudes

In general, Sinhalese residents in the south and centre of Sri Lanka spoke far more candidly to *Jane's* than their Tamil counterparts in the country's north. For the Sinhalese, the decades-long conflict restored the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka while retaining Sinhalese political primacy. The fighting between the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) and the LTTE was often described by interviewees as a victorious episode that was unlikely to ever reignite owing to the decapitation of the LTTE's leadership, especially the killing of LTTE

leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran in Mullaitivu district in May 2009. Prabhakaran's death marked the decisive end of the conflict.

Tamil residents of Kandy and Jaffna interviewed by *Jane's* held a strongly opposed view of the war's legacy. These residents told *Jane's* that although the desire for a Tamil homeland remained, a return to armed struggle was unlikely and undesirable in the near term. These interviewees also cited the absence of a unifying leader similar to Prabhakaran – who helped pioneer suicide attacks as a commonplace tactic and sent child soldiers into human-wave attacks – as the key factor preventing the meaningful reconstitution of the LTTE. The political fragmentation of the international Tamil diaspora that formerly funnelled cash to, and helped procure arms for, the LTTE is an additional factor inhibiting the group's return.



Sri Lankan Navy soldiers inspect a van at a checkpoint in Colombo on 3 May 2019. The April terrorist attacks were the worst the country has suffered since the end of the civil war against the LTTE in May 2009. (Ishara S Kodikara/AFP/Getty Images)

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Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was president during the late war period beginning in 2005, remained a divisive figure among the people interviewed by *Jane's*. Among Sinhalese, he and his brother Gotabaya, who was secretary of defence during the same period, were credited with overseeing the final defeat of the LTTE and the killing of Prabhakaran. However, the interviewees also referred to perceptions of corruption around the brothers' administration.

Sinhalese interviewees maintained that some Western states bore responsibility for prolonging past ethnic violence. The apparent tolerance of informal transnational remittance schemes among the Tamil diaspora in these states was construed by some of the interviewees as tacit approval for ethnic separatism promulgated by the LTTE. Locals in Southern Province specifically cited Australia, Canada, and Norway as culpable in this respect. In contrast, residents of Tamil-majority Jaffna in Northern Province praised these same states for the support they provided to Tamils fleeing northern and eastern Sri Lanka, allowing exiles to build diaspora Tamil communities across the developed world.

Muslim community

The Sinhalese and Tamil communities both have Christian – primarily Catholic – minorities alongside their respective Theravada Buddhist and Hindu majorities. In contrast, Sri Lanka's linguistically Tamil Sunni Muslims, known locally as Moors, identify as Muslims who happen to be historically Tamil-speaking.

Although the terms Muslim and Moor are often used interchangeably when describing the island's Sunni adherents, the term Muslim also includes Malays from Southeast Asia who immigrated to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during British colonial rule. The term Moor has a more indigenous connotation. As such, the cultural identity of Sri Lankan Muslims is anchored far more in religious norms than in ethnic characteristics, in contrast to Sinhalese and Tamils.

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