

Sensitivity, solidarity and social stability

A post Easter-Sunday Reflection

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The message

The worship had just reached the *Anamnesis*, the affirmation of God's intervention in history, when the police arrived. The officer was courteous but firm. The service had to be terminated and the people dispersed. Beyond this he remained tight lipped.

Pictures on people's smart phones said the rest. Unbelievable scenes of death and havoc were to change all expectations of Easter harmony for Sri Lankans.

Responsible but subdued

When it became known that an extremist Islamist group was responsible, Muslim leaders responded promptly. They dissociated the wider community from the National Thowheeth Jama'ath, and then disclosed what only a few knew. Information on the group had been divulged to state authorities, as far back as 2014.

The bombings also subdued the Muslim community. A journalist travelling through Muslim areas reported on the visible absence of Muslims throughout a six hour journey. The same is true of Colombo and its suburbs. It is as if the Muslim part of the Sri Lankan whole, has suddenly shrunk.

This is perhaps what certain nationalist elements wanted when they began to contest Muslim identity soon after the end of the war in 2009.

Beginning with objections to halal food on the shelves, the campaign spread to public incitement and sporadic attacks on mosques and prayer centers, businesses, shops and residences in different parts of the country. In spite of public outrage, very little has been done to prosecute the perpetrators. The mobs that spread carnage were at times led by men in the venerated yellow robe.

Suspicion re-visited

There are already signs that the Easter tragedy is fanning these anti-Muslim sentiments.

A campaign to ban the burqa, led by a government MP, is already in place. The rider that this should be done in consultation with Muslim leaders makes little sense. Consultation occurs best when the parties are stable and rid of fear and intimidation. Moreover, the disregard for women, whose freedom of religion and expression is directly affected through this move, is telling.

Voices have also begun to question teachings in Madrasas. At a recent inter-religious meeting called by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, several non-Muslims insisted that these schools should be investigated. They are suspected of propagating Sharia law and extremism.

Security measures are once again becoming selective. Check points in the Eastern Province, single out Muslims just as they did Tamils, not too long ago. And Muslim residences are subject to greater scrutiny, just like Tamil residences were, not too long ago.

Security operations receive unhealthy TV coverage. Graphic pictures of people taken in and weapons seized, in specific cultural settings, spread fear, suspicion and hostility.

As people add up the incidents to imagine a frightening total, the state stubbornly refuses to regulate the dissemination of news. Narrated security updates without images, is the best balance between the right to information and provocative news, in times of social unrest.

Lessons for all

That past information on extremists and current information on hideouts, have come from responsible Muslims, does not seem to have redefined the situation. It is too easily assumed that all Muslims are sympathizers and non-Muslims do not engage in acts of terror.

These trends unfortunately blur the lines between, exclusivism and extremism, and extremism and terrorism. Most persons of all religions and cultures with exclusive beliefs (about God or truth for instance) are

not extremists, while most who have extremist beliefs will not resort to terrorism.

Failure to digest and articulate these distinctions, easily lead to the stereotyping of a whole community. If left unchallenged, this in turn can escalate into deeply damaging racist perceptions accompanied by discriminatory policies, as a whole community is unfairly held responsible for the actions of some.

Such developments, when coupled with unaddressed systemic ridicule and violence against Sri Lankan Muslims, as well as the global marginalisation that Muslims have been subject to, could dangerously feed retaliatory violence.

This is the hard lesson that the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 teaches. Months after the pogrom, the LTTE still in its toddler years, swelled in numbers.

Another lesson the Tamil ethnic crisis asserts is the dangerous drift from stringent security measures meant to neutralize perpetrators, to the erosion of the fundamental rights of a whole nation. The past five decades records that this swing was not by accident. Like other 'democratic states' the Sri Lankan state has been known to manipulate social unrest to increase executive powers and undermine democratic dissent, freedom and institutions.

Lessons for Christians and Muslims

This tragedy also brings respective lessons for Christians and Muslims.

The Easter Sunday attack on the Zion Church in Batticaloa exposed the ignorance of most Christians about the existence and identity of this Church. Initial reports referred to the Church as (Roman) Catholic, and even Anglican. When it was known to be neither, its' grief and suffering by-passed the attention and compassion of the wider Church.

It was only when sections of the media incorporated the deaths (almost 50% were children) and injuries of its members into the national circle of grief, that the older historic Churches changed their stance. Till then the indifference to the isolated sufferings of these Christians was typical of the Colombo based ecclesiastical hub.

The tears and ashes of the Zion Church has become a poignant invitation to the whole Body of Christ, to come to its senses and sit at one table. As the sharp hurts and disagreements that have divided Christians over the Centuries surface, we who once burnt each other to death at the stake, must learn to forgive and love one another. If not, our pleading for reconciliation among others, will be hollow.

As Muslims and non-Muslims speak and write in the public realm, and close, trusted conversations agree, a sensitive concern is being raised. The fairly recent influence of *Wahabism*, seems to be the cause of internal tensions and wider social misunderstanding of the Muslim community. A Sunday Times journalist, went further (in a well-documented article last Sunday) to suggest that this doctrine had even led to internecine violence, and a couple of killings, over the recent past.

Whether or not *Wahabism* has become a negative influence within the Muslim community and its image in the country, is a matter for Muslims to address through self-scrutiny. Two questions may however help such an exercise. Has *Wahabism* added to or taken away from the authentic teaching, practice and spirituality of Islam, and has *Wahabism* helped or hindered the integration of Muslim culture in the wider Sri Lankan culture?

Why Christians?

A hasty answer that it was 'retaliation' for the New Zealand mosque attacks, was courteously refuted by the Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The connection is certainly far-fetched. Other Asian countries in the region with Muslim majorities and vulnerable Christian Churches, would have made more obvious locations, if this was the objective.

The honest answer is that we do not know as yet. What we do know is that several lethal explosions killed and injured mostly Christians at worship, and some foreigners and locals in hotels, within a time line of 45 minutes on Easter Sunday.

We also know that the perpetrators were a group of Sri Lankan Islamists. All else, whether they were IS agents or a peripheral group, who was the master mind, what was the purpose of the attacks and who stands to benefit from them, is at best speculation.

That more will come to light, as political agendas unfurl and collaborators typically fall out, is fairly certain. Till then we are to carefully read the signs of the times and remain tentative.

Politics; here and beyond

Of course there is something else the whole country knows. A hotly contested Presidential election is on the cards and the Easter Sunday violence could well influence the tide of voting.

No sooner the blasts occurred, the search began for a candidate who could best deal with a terrorist threat. Sections of the media and waves of public opinion have since fed the discourse with passion.

These developments plus the smooth introduction, of the IS equation, promise that the coming months will be full of intrigue. IS, unlike the LTTE, spells global terror, and global terror we are being reminded requires a global response.

This will mean that global powers already beating the IS drum, will now tug at strings they earlier pulled. It also means that aspirant presidents, if not at it already, will soon be scouting around for best deals that will entrench them at the summit of power. As military bases and the sale of sophisticated armaments plus commissions, flavor these deals, the sovereignty and needs of the people will, as we know too well, matter least.

People together

In these circumstances it is only a people's democratic movement, capable of throwing up an entirely new leadership that will lead us out of this worrying mess.

Such a movement will face an uphill task. Rejected aspirants will fight back with fury. Ways of building social trust alongside security operations will have to be learnt. And 'big power' encroachment, with its' baggage of enticements will have to be resisted, without closing the door on international expertise and resources.

Since our failed legislators now display an unusual interest in religion, and religious leaders allow themselves to be mobilised into yet unknown agendas, such a democratic collaboration will be wise. It will

consequently distinguish between, politicised religion that rides the back of human suffering, and dignified religion that distances itself from these very forces on behalf of the people, just as the late Sobitha Himi did, and taught us to do.

In a word, the Easter Sunday bombings challenge us all over again, to build sensitive human solidarity, for social stability. Failure to do so will plunge us even further into the corrosive politics of self-interest, at home and beyond.

With peace and blessings to all,

+Duleep