

# Sri Lankan president orders new inquiry into Easter Sunday terrorist attack

Saman Gunadasa  
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In a calculated attempt to win the Catholic vote, newly installed Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake visited St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo on Sunday morning. He spoke to the families of those killed and injured in the Easter Sunday suicide bomb attacks on April 21, 2019 and laid floral tributes.

More than 270 men, women and children were killed and around 500 were injured in the terrorist bombings of three churches and three luxury hotels. At St. Sebastian's church alone, there were some 219 casualties recorded.

Sunday's event was a stage-managed event with the presence of the Colombo Archbishop Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith and other church leaders, with widespread media coverage. It was aimed in particular at the country's Christian population of more than 1.5 million.

In the wake of winning the presidency last month, Dissanayake is desperately seeking to achieve a parliamentary majority after calling a general election for November 14. He leads the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its electoral front, National People's Power, which has never held office and only held three seats in the previous 225-seat parliament.

The majority of victims of the 2019 bombings belonged to Sri Lanka's Catholic population. Their families have accused successive governments under presidents Maithripala Sirisena, Gotabaya Rajapakse and Ranil Wickremesinghe of failing to carry out investigations, particularly over allegations of the involvement of military intelligence terrorist attacks.

Speaking on Sunday, Dissanayake declared: "There is a widespread belief in society that the Easter Sunday attacks may have been carried out to gain political mileage." However, he made no mention of who was widely believed to have gained or how.

All the evidence points to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in conjunction with local Islamist extremist group, National Thowheeth Jamma'ath (NTJ). ISIS released photos of eight suicide bombers and claimed the responsibility.

However, many unanswered questions remained. Most

importantly, why did the government and military establishment take no action despite receiving prior warnings from foreign intelligence sources? The Indian intelligence agency specifically warned its Sri Lankan counterpart over two weeks prior to the attack that suicide bombings were being organized by NTJ operative Zahran Hashim targeting churches.

The military and police hierarchy, as well as President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the parliamentary opposition leader, were among those informed. No action was taken, however, to prevent the attacks and the loss of hundreds of lives.

The obvious question is: why? The answer is also clear: the political leaders and military-police top brass allowed the carnage to take place in order to whip up anti-Muslim communalism and justify the mobilisation of the military and police to counter the rising opposition of the working class to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime.

Following the bombings, the government imposed a state of emergency and banned all May Day rallies and meetings—a clear sign that the real target of the crackdown is the working class. In addition, the military were granted police powers, including the detention of persons and seizure of property without warrant.

The WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned at the time that these profoundly anti-democratic measures had the backing of all the establishment political parties amid a resurgence of strikes and protests against the government's harsh austerity measures.

The SEP launched a campaign against the anti-Muslim xenophobia and provocations by government and opposition political parties alike, along with the media, aimed at dividing the working class. Organized racist groups violently attacked innocent Muslims and their property, injuring dozens. At least one person was killed.

The government of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe did nothing to protect Muslims and allowed the mayhem to proceed.

As he pitched for the Catholic vote on Sunday,

Dissanayake spoke as if the JVP/NPP was an innocent bystander in the events. Referring to the possibility that the attacks had been allowed to proceed for political gain, he declared that if politics in the country has reached such an extreme, the first priority must be to eliminate this dangerous situation.

Yet, at the time, the JVP/NPP, which has a long history of anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim racism, joined in the foul communal campaign. Speaking to parliament on May 7 2019, Dissanayake denounced the Muslim community as a whole, demanding that all Muslims brand the bombers as terrorists. In what amounted to an incitement to violence, he declared: “This destructive embryo is being developed inside a Muslim womb.”

The clear political beneficiary of the Easter Sunday bombings was the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) which exploited the anxieties and fears raised by the attacks in its campaign for its candidate, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, in the November 2019 presidential election.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, a former military officer, served as former defence secretary under his brother President Mahinda Rajapakse, in 2009 in the final months of the reactionary communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They were principally responsible for the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the devastating military operations that crushed the LTTE.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse came to power promising to establish “national security” and to combat “terrorism.” He continued the poisonous anti-Muslim campaign to divert opposition to his government’s deep attacks on social and democratic rights. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic claiming without a shred of evidence that the Muslim community was the source of the deadly virus in Sri Lanka.

In September 2023, British television Channel 4 produced a report claiming that the head of Sri Lanka’s State Intelligence Service (SIS) Suresh Sallay had orchestrated the Easter Sunday bomb plot. At the time, he was working for the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) and aimed to generate a climate of extreme instability to pave the way for the Rajapakses to return to power. Sallay denied the allegations and sued several accusers.

Ravi Seneviratne, former head of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID), which investigated the Easter Sunday bombing, concluded that the DMI where Sallay worked had attempted to mislead those investigating the April 2019 bombings.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse appointed a presidential commission into the bombings which produced a report in 2021 that in effect exonerated the military—with which he was closely associated—of any involvement. Two committees

were appointed under President Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2023 and 2024 to investigate the bombings, including into the Channel 4 allegations. Neither of those committee reports has been made public.

In a fundamental rights case last year, the Supreme Court found former president Maithripala Sirisena, along with the four top government officials in 2019—the defence secretary, inspector general of police and the heads of two intelligence agencies—guilty of ignoring the warnings of the attack and allowing the bombings to take place. They were ordered to pay compensation to the victims.

Now Dissanayake, who postured as a champion against corruption and criminality in the political establishment during the presidential campaign, wants to appear to be taking action. He reportedly sacked Suresh Sallay as head of the State Intelligence Service (SIS) after he refused to resign, and installed the retired head of CID Ravi Seneviratne as secretary to the Public Security Ministry. “The recent revelations made regarding the terror attacks are also being looked into,” he declared.

While Dissanayake has called for another investigation into the Easter Sunday bombings, why has he ignored calls for the public release of two existing committee reports? The JVP, through the NPP, has been cultivating relations with retired military and police officers and has always defended the military top brass against allegations of war crimes during the protracted war against the LTTE. Who is Dissanayake defending?

More fundamentally, the new president’s call for a fresh investigation into the 2019 terrorist attacks is not out of sympathy for victims or concern for justice and democratic rights. Aside from his cynical electoral calculations, Dissanayake is, above all, determined to whitewash the military and police which he will not hesitate to use against the opposition of working people as he implements the harsh austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund.



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