

Sri Lanka's Religious Violence and the US Pivot to Asia

By [Gearóid Ó Colmáin](#)

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Recent inter-communal riots in Sri Lanka have highlighted the problem of religious extremism, particularly among Asia's Buddhist population. But the Buddhist nationalist point of view has been largely ignored in favour of a discourse which demonises Buddhists as aggressors and portrays Muslims as innocent victims. The reality is far more complex.

Part I

A state of emergency has been introduced in Sri Lanka after an outbreak of violence between Buddhists and Muslims. According to reports, the violence erupted after a Buddhist truck driver was killed on the 4th of March by three inebriated Muslims, which was followed by attacks from “Buddhist mobs” on the Muslim community of Kandy city.

The Sri Lankan government, which was due to face a vote of no confidence among growing discontent with **President Maithripala Sirisena**'s leadership, has shut down social media. The Western media have laid most of the blame for the violence on “Buddhist mobs” and “Buddhist extremists”.

What is clear, however, is that over 200 Muslim homes and businesses have been burned down. There is video evidence of the local police being blamed by Muslim proprietors for inaction. But what media reports ignore is the video evidence of Muslim rioters with long sticks attacking the police. Instead, all reports refer to violent Buddhist mobs without showing any evidence of who is responsible for the violence. Why?

US Pivot to Asia

Recovering from a long civil war against the Western-backed Tamil Tigers which ended in 2009, Sri Lanka's reconstruction has been largely due to Chinese investment. In 2017, China became the country's biggest foreign investor when the Hambantota port on the country's southern coast was leased to it for [99 years](#).

Sri Lanka is a key strategic maritime outpost in Beijing's One-Belt One-Road initiative, which aims to substantially develop China's maritime trade routes and port facilities. China's strategic reach into the Indian Ocean poses a threat to Washington's 'pivot to Asia' and the attempt to encircle and contain China with US military bases. This is the context within which 'inter-ethnic' violence in Sri Lanka must be [understood](#).

A *New York Times* article published on the 9th of March entitled ' How China is challenging

American dominance in Asia', shows the importance of Sri Lanka in US imperial strategy:

"Sri Lanka might not seem like a geopolitical bellwether. But Asia-watchers have been glued to developments here since 2014, when a Chinese submarine sailed into a port built with Chinese investment. It marked a new era, in which China is converting its economic power into military power — and, in poorer democracies, into political [influence](#)."

India has also expressed concern about growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka. Relations between Colombo and New Dehli are often tense due to the latter's support for the Tamil Tigers during the Sri Lankan civil war.

Sri Lanka, like Myanmar, is a predominantly Buddhist country with a rich religious tradition of Theravada Buddhism. But the country's Muslim minority is rapidly increasing with higher birth rates and high rates of Muslim immigration. As the Muslim community gets generous support from wealthy Arab nations of the Organisation of Islamic States (OIC) such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists claim that political Islam is attempting to take over the country.

They have opposed measures by the government to impose a Halal tax on the grounds that the majority should not have to change its laws for a minority. The Western media and international human rights NGOs have accused the Buddhists of being "racists" who are spreading hate speech. The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a Buddhist nationalist association formed in 2012, have been described as the country's "fascists" and have been accused of committing pogroms against the Muslim minority. But the BBS has always denied advocating violence against Muslims.

In spite of repeatedly condemning violence against Muslims and having the support of the former Muslim mayor of Colombo, BBS has been subject to a vicious media disinformation campaign.

But the group is also critical of other minorities who have substantial international backing such as the Christians. BBS claims that the United States is using evangelical Christianity to gain influence in the country. The United States has used evangelical churches for political subversion of other countries in the past, a fact well-documented in Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett's book 'Thy will be done - The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the [Age of Oil](#)'.

The BBS also claims the English language media in the country is working for foreign interests. In most developing countries, English language media is often a vehicle for US propaganda.

The BBS has accused government minister **Milinda Moragoda** of waging a war on the nation's Buddhists. A 2011 wikileaks cable revealed Morgoda was a US [asset](#).

Part II

US funded 'alternative media'

The Sri Lankan government shut down social media immediately after the riots spread. A

key organisation operating with elements in the Sri Lankan government is the Centre for Policy Alternatives, (CPA) a think-tank financed by the US government's National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to the tune of [\\$ 80,000](#).

The CPA promotes "alternative media" in Sri Lanka and set up the website *Groundviews* in 2017. According to NED,

"Groundviews serves as an outlet for activists, bloggers, and journalists to disseminate and discuss issues of democracy and human rights."



The National Endowment for Democracy was established in 1983 to be used as a softpower tool to further the interests of US foreign policy. **Allen Weinstein**, who helped found NED, said in 1991 that "a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the [CIA](#)".

Many of the stories about "Buddhist mobs" have come from *Groundviews* [reporting](#).

There is certainly evidence of extensive destruction of hundreds of Muslim businesses and homes but there is as yet no evidence of who exactly committed the crimes. Many sources in Sri Lanka suspect government *agents provocateurs* to be behind the riots due to the inaction of the police. They claim that the government is using the clampdown on social media and the state of emergency to distract from its dismal political record, rampant corruption and growing unpopularity. Evidence may emerge to corroborate those claims.

Although the country is moving closer to China, prime minister Sirisena is generally considered to be closer to the US than his predecessor Rajapaksa. The US Peace Corps, a front organisation for the CIA, is due to return to Sri Lanka this year. Instability as a pretext for increasing US military presence on the island to counter Chinese expansion cannot be ruled out.

But given the fact that the US-funded 'alternative media' are responsible for so many of the anti-Buddhist tweeting in the country and many of their tweets accuse the government of being anti-Muslim, it is possible that agents working on behalf of the US embassy may be stoking the violence, while also attempting to replace nationalist elements in the government with pro-US proxies.

US interference in Sri Lanka is [extensive](#).

Information about which posts should be banned was provided to Facebook by the US-funded CPA. Some of the banned pages accused the government of orchestrating the violence and showed police beating peaceful civilians. Many Sri Lankan Facebook groups

compared the anti-Muslim violence to the 1983 anti-Tamil violence in which the government is believed to have been complicit.

Buddhist monk **Venerable Elle Gunawansa Thero** told Sri Lanka's Daily Mirror:

'I went to Kandy. I think such violence was manipulated to destabilize the country. This is part of a conspiracy to infiltrate into this country through a different access. Regardless of addressing the needs of our people, those concerned live to satisfy the Western world. Amidst chaos, the government fulfils the whims of the [West](#).'



As we have shown in previous articles, US support for takfiri terrorists in Asia is a key element of the US' long-standing proxy war against China. From Myanmar to Thailand; the Philippines; Indonesia; Malaysia and Western China, the United States and many countries in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are using takfiri terrorists as shock troops in the US 'Pivot to Asia'- a policy announced by former US president Barack Obama in 2011.

The Groundviews website criticises the Sri Lankan government for the ban on social media and boasts of having made thousands of tweets during the riots. But an analysis of some of the google drive documents uploaded to the site allegedly proving the implication of radical Buddhist monks in stoking the violence fail to provide evidence to back up their accusations. There are pictures of monks speaking to crowds. One monk has his hands raised up toward the sky in a pose which could just as easily be interpreted as an attempt to calm his audience. In fact, that is what controversial monk Gnanasaro Thero claimed when he was accused of provoking the riots. Thero claims he traveled to Kandy in order to assist in calming down the violence.

Although Gnansaro's credibility as a bona fides nationalist has been called into question by revelations of funding from the Norwegian government, the BBS does not have a particularly well-organised PR service. Their statements are rarely translated or accurately diffused by the mainstream media and their policies are rarely discussed with any attempt at objectivity and contextualisation: Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka do have legitimate grievances.

Some analysts claim that the BBS is funded by the CIA. But BBS' Chief Executive Officer **Dilanthe Withanage** says members of the current organisation went on a trip to Norway before the organisation was formed in order to meet with members of the Tamil diaspora

abroad. He also claims that they were visited by a political officer of the US embassy in Colombo and criticised the hostile attitude of the US government to their nationalist [ideology](#).

Infiltration of the organisation by the CIA is, of course, always possible and even likely but it is hard to see how such an organisation could serve US interests given their objection to multiculturalism, pluralism and bourgeois, liberal “democratic” values. Former US **General Thomas P.M Barnett** advocates the assassination of nationalists in his book ‘Blue Print for Action’.

One of the rumours spread before the anti-Muslim pogroms was that Muslim shops were putting “sterility pills” into food destined for Buddhists. Spreading false rumours for the purposes of social destabilisation is textbook CIA [strategy](#).

A Sri Lankan activist sympathetic to the plight of Buddhists told this author that many Buddhist activists may be manipulated by outside forces, including Gnanasara Thero. Gnanasara has links to controversial far-right politician **Champika Ranawaka** with whom he was allegedly involved in violent activities in the past – most notably breaking up anti-war [meetings](#).

When a Buddhist monk self-immolated in protest against halal legislation in 2013, Champika hailed the act as a great sacrifice. Similar acts in Tibet have been praised by fanatical Buddhists supported by the [CIA](#) and have been described as ‘martyrs’ in the Western press. However, it must also be borne in mind that Sinhalese Buddhists, like their Burmese counterparts, have not received favourable coverage in the Western corporate press.

In a press conference after the riots, BBS leader **Gnanasara Thero** said his organisation was fond of moderate Muslims but had a problem with the spread of Saudi-funded Wahhabism in the country. He accused Sri Lanka’s **Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe** of this “orchestrated racist event”.

He said “the West wants brainless puppets in Sri Lanka; these are the people in government now.”

Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the United Nationalist Party, (UNP), is the most pro-US politician in the current coalition government. Over-hyped allegations of corruption and US soft-power pressure helped oust the country’s former pro-Chinese leader Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015.

A former communist Sri Lanka’s current president **Maithripala Sirisena** was educated in Russia and is said to have a particularly warm relationship with president [Putin](#).



Sirisena congratulated President Putin on his recent election victory stating that Russia will make further progress under Putin's [leadership](#).

After the riots Gnanasara Thero attended a conference in Japan with president Sirisena. President Sirisena needs more Buddhist nationalist support if he is to be reelected.

Although Sri Lanka's Buddhists are a majority in the country, the BBS claim that they are a minority internationally and that the Muslim population is supported by the wealthy Wahhabi states of the Gulf. They have also complained about by the activities of evangelical Christians and the Catholic Church. The leader of the Global Tamil Forum is **Fr. Emmanuel S.J.**, a Catholic priest.

Gnanasara Thero encouraged Sri Lankans to unite in order so that the country does not become another Libya or Syria. He also accuses Muslim politicians of fanning the flames of sectarianism by refusing to admit that the Muslim communities are at least partly responsible for violence.

In a press release **Tamara Kunanayakam**, Sri Lanka's former Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, said that the riots were planned to coincide with the arrival of the UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs:

" It gave the High Commissioner the opportunity to threaten Sri Lanka with universal jurisdiction if it fails to make progress in accountability and transitional justice. His choice of language is to target the previous Government under Mahinda Rajapaksa, to strengthen Washington's allies within the present regime, and to advance Washington's project to gain International legitimacy for its unilateral interventions in the internal affairs of other [states](#)."

Part III

Human Rights Terrorism

From 1983 to 2009 the Sri Lankan military fought a long battle against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a terrorist organisation which attempted to carve out a separate Tamil homeland in the north of the country. The LTTE was supported by India, Britain and

the United States. The Sri Lankan victory over LTTE was achieved through military aid from Russia, China and Iran.

The Tamil Forum is based in Britain and maintains close ties to the British government. The British Government has been at the forefront of attempts to blame most of the violence of the country's civil war on the Sri Lankan military. They have brought extreme pressure through NGO activism and the United Nations to tarnish the image of the country.

In 2011, Channel 4 produced a report which they claimed "proved" war crimes by the Sri Lankan [military](#).

The report was cogently refuted by the Sri Lankan government in their documentary 'Lies Agreed Upon.' Channel 4's lies were conclusively refuted in a booklet written by a Sri Lankan think tank entitled '[Corrupted Journalism](#)'.

In 2015, Maithripala Sirisena was elected as the country's president. Although he is said to be more pro-Western than his predecessor, his government is accused of not having implemented the kind of reforms demanded by the West. His criticism of pro-Western NGOs and media outlets suggest he may not be the push-over the United States and Britain hoped for.

Nationalists in Sri Lanka have accused the United Nations, international NGOs and the United States of promoting Muslim immigration into Sri Lanka in an attempt to balkanise the country. They have wondered why, for example, the country is forced to take in so-called 'rohingya' refugees while the Gulf monarchies refuse to do so.

The 2014 Aluthgama Riots started by Muslims, not Buddhists

It is important to place the recent riots in the context of the country's recent history. Muslim attacks on Buddhists go unreported or are generally played down by the media. On June 12, 2014, Buddhists in the town of Darga were preparing to celebrate Poson Poya, one of the most important Buddhist festivals of the year.

On his way to the event, Buddhist monk, the Venerable Ayagama Samitha Thero's three-wheeler vehicle was blocked by three inebriated Muslim youths (alcohol abuse is a growing problem in Sri Lanka).

He was physically assaulted. Ayagama Samitha Thero was not a member of the Bodu Bala Sena group. In fact, he had been known for his charity towards poor Muslims and was subsequently visited by a Muslim in hospital.

Ayagama Samitha Thero was taken to hospital and a group of Buddhist monks pleaded with the local police to take action against the perpetrators. Buddhists in Sri Lanka have repeatedly complained about the inaction of the police in prosecuting attacks on monks.

In response to the attack and the inaction of the police, the Bodu Bala Sena organisation convened a meeting in Aluthgama on June 14 to discuss what they perceive is an increasing and internationally-backed islamisation of their country.

Witnesses told the BBC Sinhala how Muslim youths had started the [violence](#).

Footage of the parade clearly shows what is alleged to have been the first stone thrown at

the event. The stone is thrown by one of the Muslim protesters. The video also shows Muslims throwing stones from the roof of a building under [construction](#).

In the ensuing violence, the properties of Muslims and Buddhists were destroyed but the media blamed 'Buddhist nationalists' for the violence.

Sri Lankan writer **Shenali D. Waduge** believes the Empire is attempting to divide the island:

There is a pattern to the denigration. All this shows that there has been a very unfair and unjust coverage of the incident and a totally unfair denigration of Buddhists. But, we understand the reasons for this too. It is well within a larger game plan and one tied to decades of efforts to denationalize and divide the Buddhists and systematically remove the power they have that holds the country together. Sadly, ignorant Sinhala politicians for power and money have become pawns without realizing that they can and will only lead in a nation that is held together by [Buddhists](#).

As in many developing countries, the ignorance and stupidity of elected officials and media outlets plays into the hands of Machiavellian imperial agencies but some politicians have spoken out. Speaking of the Aluthgama riots, **Minister Patali Champika Ranawaka** of Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) said:

"The US is repeating the mistakes it made in Afghanistan by distorting the Aluthgama incidents and very soon will suffer dire consequences. By nurturing and fostering militant Muslim groups against a democratically elected government instead of helping to hunt down the militant elements within the Muslim community, the US has only strengthened the global Taliban [movement](#),"

Conclusion

Having defeated the Western-backed Tamil tigers, the Sri Lankan government now faces a new form of war: coercive engineered migration backed by UN agencies and a panoply of NGOs in the service of Western imperialism. The purpose? Render an insubordinate post-colonial country more submissive to 'global governance' and US strategic interests in South Asia by using the Wahhabised Muslim minority as a tool to fracture national unity.

A notable exception to the pro-Western liberal piety typical of Sri Lanka's English language press is to be found in the Colombo Telegraph piece by Sanja De Silva Jayatilleka, which denounces the lies and hypocrisy of the West in their war on Syria and compares them to Western lies about Sri Lanka's war against the [LTTE](#).

It compares the situation of the two countries. When **Bashar al-Assad** was elected leader of the Syrian Arab Republic he was cautiously courted by the West. Assad had neo-liberal economic advisers and favoured reforms involving privatising parts of the economy. He was even invited to Paris by French **President Nicola Sarkozy** in 2008 for the 14th of July military parade. But when Assad failed to deliver, he quickly became a 'brutal dictator' and when the Empire sent an army of head-choppers and psychopaths to slaughter Syria's people, he was accused of 'killing his own people'.

It was hoped Sirisena would bow to pressure from UN agencies and human rights groups by revising the official Sri Lankan narrative of the war thereby weakening national unity and opening the door ever wider to Western-style globalisation. As Jean-Pierre Page has pointed [out](#), President Sirisena has significantly compromised the country's independence to please Washington and the self-proclaimed "international community"; yet a recent Al Jazeera interview would suggest that more is required of [him](#).

In her above quoted press release, Tamara Kunanayakam states:

"Muslim attacks serve only Washington's agenda, propping up its allies in a tottering Yahapalana Government, silencing the opposition within and outside Government, dividing the people, shifting their attention away from the real issues, and, advancing Washington's objective of turning Sri Lanka into a vassal state that can be utilised in its strategy of containing and rolling back China."

Sri Lanka has a poverty rate of 41%. Slavishly following the "Washington Consensus" of neoliberalism and phony human rights discourse will not pull millions of people out of poverty; Colombo will have to look east if it is to become a successful nation. Playing minorities against majorities or vice versa is a standard technique of imperial destabilisation. In the case of Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the overwhelming bias of the media is in favour of Muslims and against Buddhists. Buddhists are to become the new scapegoats of US imperialism's 'pivot to Asia'.

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This article was originally published on [Gearóid Ó Colmáin's blog](#).

Gearóid Ó Colmáin is an Irish journalist and political analyst based in Paris. His work focuses on globalisation, geopolitics and class struggle.

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