

EDITORIAL

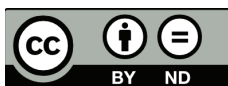
Understanding social upheavals: beyond conspiracy theories

Sociological explanations frequently serve as a counter point to popular conspiracy theories. Historically, sociology evolved as a subject that tried to prove that social reality cannot be reduced to the separate actions of the individuals who make up that society, such individual motivations or what was understood as the standard way persons think and behave in given situations being the dominant analytical frameworks in other social sciences like economics, psychology, and political science. A key founder of sociology, Frenchman Emile Durkheim tried to identify the social as external to and in some ways imposed from outside upon the individuals who are included in the social reality. In his unique way, he demonstrated the validity of the social by explaining how even a deeply personal and emotional matter such as suicide must be seen as a socially determined phenomenon. Of course, these views have been interrogated by many critics over the years for his single-minded preoccupation with the social by deemphasizing its natural linkages with the psychological and for his denial of the agency of human beings.

Sri Lanka has always been a hotbed of conspiracy theories. Matters of national importance, whether we are talking about collective uprisings against the state such as the JVP uprisings in 1971 and 1987-1989 and the LTTE uprising from 1980s until 2009 or public decisions such as signing of a peace accord between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in 2002, were explained by certain observers in terms of conspiracy theories of one kind or another. A secretive nature and lack of transparency often added to public confusion about these events. However, nearly always conspiracy theories are ways of explaining away the compounded social and political reality by parties with vested interests in keeping with their own political and ideological moorings rather than valid objective explanations of the complex reality we are dealing with. As a professional social science journal, it is our duty to explain that conspiracy theories in circulation are seriously flawed when it comes to explaining the complex realities fraught

with multiple challenges we are dealing with in contemporary Sri Lanka. Conspiracy theories come forward to oversimplify matters, interpret a complex phenomenon in ways that conform with preconceptions and suspicions and deny an evidence-based analysis that is likely to challenge popular assumptions and preconceived ideas and the popular need to find a culprit who can be fully blamed for a public disaster that has unfolded. While key decision makers responsible for poor public decisions must be certainly identified and appropriate action taken against them, it should not end up with untenable conspiracy theories as valid explanations for macro social processes with a complex etiology.

Fredric Jameson (1999) considered conspiracy theories as ‘the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age’ characterized by insecurities and related paranoia. In other words, conspiracy theories are a questionable way of speculatively making sense of many seemingly unexplainable issues in the postmodern world. However, conspiracy theories often involve blaming a publicly tainted person without investigating his or her specific liability within a larger macro environment characterized by resource constraints and unsurmountable challenges. What is equally problematic is the complete ignorance or blatant neglect of relevant social science perspectives in trying to explain complex social realities attributing them to assumed conspiracy plans of one or more actors to account for events that engage the agency of a multitude of related or unrelated actors as well as the unintended consequences of their action that is social or group generated rather than an aggregated outcome of individual decision making. This is why conspiracy theories are always suspect in social sciences and seen as an epistemological frontier responding to emergencies in a populist manner without going through the rigors of systematic social analysis.



Several social upheavals that happened in Sri Lanka during the past five years can be used to illustrate how conspiracy theories divert attention away from the larger social context relating to these mobilizations requiring systematic investigation. We select the Easter attacks by a cluster of Islamic extremists on April 21, 2019 to illustrate the specific role of conspiracy theories. In this violent outbreak the country was shocked and taken by surprise with different conspiracy theories looming large in the minds of the affected people and their intellectual leaders. This event involved a serious breakdown of the law-and-order situation in the country. The conspiracy theories tried to understand the attack as the work of some hidden hands that mobilized and instrumentalized the persons involved for achieving their ulterior motives, left unelaborated in these populist explanations.

From what is reported in the media, the Easter attacks were conducted by an apparently religiously motivated secret group of armed actors who were part of a closely knit network. Several official investigations have already been carried out including an enquiry by a parliamentary select committee, two presidential commissions and a judicial investigation. These investigations tried to understand why the police and the security forces failed to prevent the attack while prior information had been received from intelligence sources outside Sri Lanka, who is accountable for the observed security lapses and how the attackers escaped the attention of the intelligence network in Sri Lanka. These are important and valid questions particularly from the law enforcement and national security angles. What is missing, however, is an investigation into the social background of the attackers, how and under what circumstances they became radicalized to the point of having a tunnel vision to end their lives and lives of others and what can be done to prevent a recurrence of such violent outbreaks in future.

Apart from a seemingly pro-government cluster of anti-Islamic conspiracy theories reporting Islamic fundamentalist mobilizations in Sri Lanka for some time, many independent observers were puzzled by an Islamic terror cell targeting their attacks on Christians involved in an important religious congregation on Easter Sunday in April 2019 and some key tourist hotels in Colombo. The deliberate targeting of Christian places of worship was particularly problematic in the light of the absence of any prior history of tension between Islam and Christianity in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, tensions between Buddhists and Muslims had been escalating with effect from 2012 due to the propaganda work of some anti-Islamic Sinhala nationalist outfits that provoked mob violence against Muslim communities and Muslim-owned businesses in areas like Aluthgama, Ampare and Digana (Haniffa *et al.*, 2014). A potential clue to solve the puzzle about the chosen targets of the Easter violence was provided by the ISIS itself when it made an official declaration through its Amaq news agency on April 23, two days after the Easter attack. It stated that the attackers involved were Islamic state fighters who targeted citizens of coalition states (meaning western tourists staying in the hotels attacked)

and the Christians (Amarsingham, 2019: 2). This suggested that the Easter attack was connected with an ISIS global campaign targeting suspected agents of westernization in the non-western world rather than any local triggers of conflict in Sri Lanka. As far as we know, the authenticity of this declaration, however, has not been verified or confirmed by any subsequent investigations.

It also raised important questions as to how an Islamist nucleus prepared to die and kill on behalf of an external agency, namely ISIS, was formed in Sri Lanka with an overall history of Islamic tolerance and support for peaceful coexistence though increasingly challenged by infiltrations of Islamic fundamentalism. On the other hand, the Catholic establishment in the country predictably disturbed over many church goers who were killed, mimed and who lost their dear family members during the attack wanted to identify the mastermind (*mahamolakaru*) behind the attack presumably considering him to be someone other than those who sacrificed their lives during the attack and probe him about why the attack was made and why innocent civilians were targeted. While this is certainly a legitimate concern, the conspiracy theories that go with it do not help understand the larger social context that produced the network of attackers and why they turned their violence towards a completely innocent party unconnected with them. The view that the attack was strategically designed by yet another third party for its own political advantage has been in circulation since the national political crisis unfolded in 2019. While this cannot be ruled out completely, how far such a master plan can instrumentalize religious sentiments connected with an established religion remains a major challenge for such a claim. These contradictory conspiracy theories leave many questions unanswered not only about the Easter attack itself, but also about the larger social context connected with the upheaval, including the global scenario where ISIS had been cornered by pro-American alignments and the local scenario of one political crisis followed by another.

There are some unresolved social issues related to the formation of an Islamist extremist group bent on violence in Sri Lanka. Why and how a nucleus of Muslims including some members of a very affluent business family in Colombo became so radicalized during a short period of time to be prepared to kill and die collectively for an externally determined cause apparently unconnected with their day-to-day existence in Sri Lanka. Why they targeted innocent civilians who are by no means accountable for the atrocities caused to ISIS is part of a larger puzzle connected with what one analyst referred to as “the ambivalence of the sacred”, particularly after 9/11 (Appleby, 2020). While religion continues to remain a key driver of global peace, the tendency on the part of certain religious actors to carry out violent attacks on identified targets is something that requires a systematic social science enquiry outside the purview of individual religious perspectives.

It is also important to note that some of the attackers were well-educated people with established professional

careers. For instance, according to media reports there was an aerospace engineer, a lawyer and two leading businesspeople in Colombo among the inner core of attackers who carried out the attack on April 21, 2019 (Srinivasan, 2019). Not only do these facts go against the secularization thesis expecting people to become less religious as they gain education and more engaged in technical and business enterprises. It also problematizes any simplistic assumptions about possible connections between economic disadvantage and radicalism. These concerns highlight the need to go beyond simplistic assumptions and popular analytical framings including conspiracy theories in understanding what caused Easter mayhem.

How this small group of faith actors became radicalized possibly through their exposure to ISIS online propaganda, powerful command Sahran was supposed to have on colloquial Tamil and Islamic religious symbols coupled with periodic physical and virtual congregations of the group need to be examined using available empirical evidence also considering potential importance of the wave of anti-Muslim violence escalated since 2012 as a trigger for this mobilization and the progressive radicalization of the nucleus of the attackers (Keethaponcalan, 2019).

Finally, in addition to pinpointing security failures contributing to the Easter attack, understanding the underlying social factors and group dynamics is necessary for preventing a possible future recurrence of Islamic radicalization leading to violence. These are some issues calling for thorough social science research in and outside Sri Lanka. Conspiracy theories of various kinds merely serve to accuse potential evil doers without providing any reliable evidence. Social sciences must bring out the social and ideological factors that account for upheavals like the Easter attack using empirical evidence and sound analytical frameworks to support their explanations. Instead of providing valid explanations of the subject under consideration, the conspiracy theories merely serve to reinforce prejudices of one kind or another at a time of uncertainty and anxiety. Often such theories add to the existing aura of anxieties and conflict dynamics. Conspiracy theories are something to be explained in social analysis rather than a satisfactory framework for explaining an organized violent attack that shocked the whole world, not just Sri Lanka. In some ways conspiracy theories are an inherent aspect of the crisis environment where affected people as well as the key stakeholders in society are constantly looking for answers that suit their interests and deep seated prejudices. Just like gossip and rumour, conspiracy theories serve to spread fake news and false alarms during civil disturbances in ways that divert public anger towards identified targets and contribute towards reinforcing conflict dynamics. This is why debunking conspiracy theories becomes an important challenge for social sciences at times of social upheavals and mass panic. In the official investigations carried out

so far, this is a dimension relatively unexplored, and much work needs to be done regarding filling in the gaps.

As usual, the current issue of the Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences brings out an array of review articles and research articles and a book review covering important policy issues and research findings relating to Sri Lanka and the South Asia region at large. These contributions fall under three broad areas, namely South Asian social issues, economic and labour market parameters and education. South Asian social issues covered include male dominance and domestic violence, knowledge, attitudes, and practices relating to COVID-19 pandemic in India and the rise of identity and patronage politics in Nepal. Articles dealing with economic and labour market issues are wide ranging. Social values relating to employment, changing mobile phone use, willingness to pay for admission to a national park are among the specific issues covered under this theme. Further the policy issues related to international labour migration in and out of South Asia are addressed in the book review published in the current issue. Education issues covered include a welcome addition of a research article on early childhood acquisition of mother tongue in Jaffna. There are also two important contributions relating to university education, one relating to strategic planning in the university system in Sri Lanka and the other focusing on job stress among female academics in India.

We do encourage social scientists in and outside Sri Lanka to continue their research and publications on important social, economic, and political challenges currently being encountered and identify innovative remedies for them. This is the only way we can possibly counter superficial propositions encapsulated in conspiracy theories.

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