

The Need To Recognize Islamist Extremism As A Threat To Annihilate Islamophobia.

Ms. CLCM Patabendige

LL.B (Hons) (Second Class) , Adv. Dip in Transitional Justice
Honorary Associate Research Fellow – Institute of National Security Studies

Abstract

Easter Sunday Attack 2019 was an unforeseen tragedy in the country where it ruthlessly killed many people. The devastating circumstances gave rise to Islamophobia, which was in existence insignificantly even prior to the Easter Sunday attack. Islamophobia can also be regarded as an emerging threat in the Sri Lankan context which results in the breach of the rights of Muslims. Likewise, the uprising Islamist extremism has become a major threat both internationally as well as domestically. Due to Islamist extremist activities, it is evident, the presence of a fear factor in the general community. Unless Islamist extremist activities are eliminated, annihilating Islamophobia will be unfeasible. Therefore, the research problem sheds light on the matter of need to eliminate Islamist extremism to annihilate Islamophobia. The research has attained the objectives and answered regarding Islamist extremism, Islamophobia, the breach of the rights of Muslims in Sri Lanka and Islamist extremism as a major cause behind Islamophobia. Research is limited to the Sri Lankan context. Research has utilized secondary sources such as scholarly articles and reports to arrive at conclusions. It has gathered primary data by a survey to get the perspective of the public. Therefore, research has a mixed approach as it is quantitative as well as qualitative.

Keywords- breach of rights of Muslims , Islamist extremism, Islamophobia, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka has a population of 21.8 million. Ethnic Sinhalese constitute 75 per cent of Sri Lanka's total population with Tamils at 15 per cent followed by Muslims at 9 per cent. The Sri Lankan Muslim community is scattered across the island with the majority (62%) living outside of the north and east of Sri Lanka where the Sinhalese predominate and with about 38% of the Muslim population living in the Tamil-dominated north and east. In a context where census taking has become politicized, it is noteworthy that Muslims have become a majority in the Ampara District of Eastern Province which is part of this region (Department of Census and Statistics–Sri Lanka, 2007). Sri Lanka is multicultural, multiethnic and multi religious. Therefore, it is of no doubt that violence can occur at any time. Controversies occur due to the nuances; however, it is those nuances which makes the country special.

Sri Lanka was on the verge of celebrating ten years of non-violence aftermath of the gruesome war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, Easter Sunday Attack 2019 shattered the national security of the country in a split second. Islamist extremism is an existing threat in the world. At present, it has become an emerging threat in Sri Lanka

which was there even before the Easter Sunday attack, but not on a greater scale. As a result of Islamist extremism and other factors, 'Islamophobia' came into existence. It is crystalline that there is a plethora of reasons behind Islamist extremism. Reasons including Islamist extremism, radicalization, politicization and extremist ideologies, which are against the sacred true religion, Islam. The research depicts Islamist extremism as a key reason that makes annihilation of Islamophobia an uphill task. Research has also recommended the steps that can be utilized to annihilate Islamophobia.

Research methodology

The research problem was the necessity to recognize Islamist extremism as a threat to annihilate Islamophobia. In order to gather information and arrive at a conclusion for the research, it has utilized both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Research has used both primary as well as secondary sources. In addition to the secondary sources available such as books, journal articles, proceedings and reports, research has used primary sources including legislations. Proving the necessity of primary data to reach findings, information from an online survey consisting of hundred random individuals were collected. This way, research has attempted to quantify societal perception.

Furthermore, the research method used is a mixed-method, which is both Qualitative and Quantitative. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007: 5) "Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone." The objective of utilizing a mixed-method was, to get a broad-based knowledge. In addition to the available literature in the research field, societal perception was extracted to quantify the results. This way, research was able to reach conclusions and recommendations.

Results and discussions

Islamist extremism in Sri Lanka

Unlike LTTE, Sri Lanka did not witness Islamist extremism on a greater scale. It was after the Easter Sunday Attack 2019 where 'a series of bombs ripped through churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, killing at least 290 people and injuring hundreds'; terrorism, violence, disharmony and radicalization escalated. Even before the Easter Sunday attack, there were cases reported which were not given due attention and investigations were left without closure. (Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings, 2022), states that, "the clues were there in mid-January, when Sri Lankan police stumbled upon 100kg (220lb) of explosives and 100 detonators, hidden in a coconut grove near the Wilpattu national park, which is a remote wilderness in Puttalam district on the west coast of the country". Police were investigating attacks on statues of Buddha by suspected Islamist radicals elsewhere in the country and four men from a newly formed "radical Muslim group" were suspected of those conducts.

There is a plethora of reasons behind Islamist extremism. One such reason is 'religious radicalization'. The preachings of these are extremist ideologies. This is not what true Islam preaches, and this practice of radical preachings were criticized by Muslim religious leaders vehemently. Even though religious

leaders and communities in the north and east complained and warned about reviving Islamism extremism in Sri Lanka, authorities did not consider it. (Sri Lanka attacks: On the day of Easter Sunday 2019, series of coordinated bomb blasts were taken place. "Mohammed Zahran Hashim, a radical preacher from Kattankudy blew himself up at the Shangri-La Hotel [who] was the mastermind of the attack". According to, (Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings, 2022) "Hashim's father sent him to a religious school for his education. Nevertheless, he soon started questioning the teachers, saying they were not following "true Islam". He was kicked out of the madrasa but continued his religious studies on his own and later started preaching challenging the established practices of local mosques". If the authorities identified the threat beforehand, neither Islamist extremism will come into picture nor will Islamophobia would have escalated.

As per, (Manoharan, Chatterjee and Ashok, 2021) "Political instability in the country... [which was a] perfect distraction from the core security and development issues" is a reason for the Islamist extremism. The result was a massive security failure which resulted in failing national security and losing the public faith in the government. Another factor for Islamist extremism is communal dissonance. In addition to inter communal dissonance, "The international Jihadist network also fostered radicalization process in the island's Muslim community". According to, (D'Souza, Bashar, Ramachandran and Gunasingham, 2022), IS-linked propaganda magazines in South Asia, such as the Sawt al-Hind (Voice of Hind), continued to glorify the 2019 Easter Sunday to attract followers from around the region. IS boasted about how the Sri Lankan militants involved "have ignited the flames of jihad by inflicting carnage on the Crusaders".

According to the survey results (See figure 01) for the question on 'Do you believe there is a tendency of Sri Lankan Muslim youth being radicalized aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attack?', 38% selected 'yes' as the answer and 36% were indecisive. Finally, 26% chose 'no' as the answer. As per the results, indecisiveness hints of a fear factor which the government needs to address vigorously. Another reason which facilitated Islamist extremism is terrorist financing. According to (Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings, 2022) "In its early years, the NTJ managed to secure donations from overseas, particularly from the Middle East, India and Malaysia. The money helped the group build its own mosque close to the beach in Kattankudy". Moreover, (BBC news Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings, 2022) stated, "the process began nearly three decades ago. The Wahhabi brand of Islam attracted the young and it also had financial backing from abroad", said Mazook Ahamed Lebbe, an official from the Federation of Mosques in the eastern town of Kattankudy.

In accordance to the survey (See figure 02), 85% was of the view that Islamist extremism is an international threat while 11% chose 'maybe' and 4% chose 'no'. All 85 % were non-Muslims. This depicts the fear factor in non-Muslims. For the question "Do you recognize Islamist extremism as a domestic threat in Sri Lanka?" (See figure 03), 70% picked 'yes', 20% chose 'maybe' and 10% chose 'no' as the answer. In light of the above findings, it is of utmost importance to prevent and mitigate Islamist extremism. On the other hand, it is also pivotal to mention the victimization of Muslims. Due to Islamist extremism, guilt free Muslims undergo Islamophobia, which is detrimental. Thus, 'Islamist extremism' has become a popular concept which is inherently evil towards Muslims.

As cited by (Imtiyaz, 2019), Professor Amir Ali, an Islamic scholar and an academic at Murdoch University says that "Sri Lankan Muslims are self-alienating. Disturbingly though, that seems to be the case, at least among some segments; especially those in Muslim enclaves in the East. When an influential minority of the community seeks a unique religious identity by alienating themselves from the mainstream society, they are bound to seek solace in the stricter form of an alien variety of religion that challenges their hitherto held local values. Several years back in Aluthgama, there were sectarian

clashes among Muslims who were divided by this invasive ideology". Due to that reason, exclusivism should not be allowed. Instead, inclusivism needs to be promoted. The rationale behind negating exclusivism is it leads to the feeling of superiority which ends up in the individual being less empathetic.

Islamophobia and the breach of the rights of Muslims in Sri Lanka

According to (Awan and Zempi, 2020) Working definition of Islamophobia, which is recommended to be adopted by the United Nations as a working definition of Islamophobia states, "A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslim or non-Muslim individuals that lead to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world, motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim.". According to the survey conducted to determine whether Sri Lanka is facing Islamophobia, the derived results were 62% of the majority believing that Sri Lanka is facing Islamophobia, 29% chose 'maybe' and 9% of the sample had chosen 'no'. (See figure 04) This indicates that Islamophobia is emerging in Sri Lanka and has not yet been well established. This also finely depicts and warns the government and governments to come on potential and existing threats. Looking at it in the Sri Lankan context, especially after the Easter Sunday Attack, resulted in anti-Muslim campaigns such as attempting to ban burqas and boycotting Muslim businesses. The situation has further escalated causing Muslim businesses to shatter due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At a devastating time when we are supposed to help each other and treat each other equally, this discriminatory behaviour is unacceptable. There is no doubt that the Sinhala extremist groups are spreading hate and creating mistrust. Some Muslims are declared and viewed as guilty even without a proper hearing. This is a breach of natural justice.

According to the 1978 Sri Lankan Constitution Article 9, "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana while assuring to all religions, the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)". Therefore, the rights of Muslims should not be breached. Chapter III of the constitution gives an array of fundamental rights. Accordingly, Article 10 states, "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice". Article 11 states that 'No person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.' Article 12(1) states that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law and 12(2) of Sri Lanka's Constitution states that "no citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any one of such grounds." Further, Section 12(3) mentions that "No person shall, on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex or any one of such grounds, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, places of public entertainment and places of public worship of his own religion". Article 13(4) states that, "no person shall be punished with death or imprisonment except by order of a competent court". The fundamental rights mentioned in chapter III explicitly states that they should not be breached. Therefore, breaching the rights is discriminatory. Discriminatory acts against Muslims therefore should not be entertained

There are limitations placed on certain fundamental rights by Article 15(7), "The exercise and operation of all the fundamental rights declared and recognized by Articles 12, 13(1), 13(2) and 14 shall be subjected to such restrictions as may be prescribed by law in the interests of national security, public order and the protection of public health or morality or for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others or of meeting the just requirements of the general welfare

of a democratic society". Due to those reasons an extremist, terrorist and a radicalized person will be deprived of rights mentioned in 15(7), including interests of national security. Furthermore, Directive Principles of States Policy in article 27(5) mentions that "The State shall strengthen national unity by promoting co-operation and mutual confidence among all sections of the People of Sri Lanka including the racial, religious, linguistic and other groups and shall take effective steps in the fields of teaching, education and information in order to eliminate discrimination and prejudice". Thus, it is important to prevent Islamophobia. Measures should be adopted to foster harmony amongst different ethnicities.

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion... to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.". Therefore, hindering religious freedom is inexcusable. Moreover, Article 27 states that "minorities shall not be denied the rights, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language". Therefore, the rights of the Muslims should not be deprived. Sri Lanka has adopted and ratified the ICCPR Act by International Covenant on Civil And Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, No. 56 Of 2007. Accordingly, the Sri Lankan act Section 3(1) states, "No person shall propagate war or advocate national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence". Thus, Islamophobia must be prevented.

Islamist extremism as a major cause behind Islamophobia

When perusing findings related to Easter Sunday Attack 2019, it is clear that 'Islamist Extremism' is the main reason. Same as rights of Muslims are breached due to Islamophobia, on the other hand rights of other ethnicities were breached as well as threatened due to Islamist extremists. All the rights aforementioned are applicable to other religious communities and it is clear that none of the rights should be breached, however, subjected to the limitations. The conducted survey gave multiple causes which resulted in Islamophobia. Participants were able to choose multiple options. (See figure 04) Significant findings derived were, the occurrence of Easter Sunday Attack 2019, the majority selected which is 75%. The next main cause was Islamist extremist activities, 69%. Both findings prove that, Islamist extremism as the prominent reason. However, several other factors were given including, politically motivated reasons, 59%. Fourthly, 56% chose discriminatory laws as a reason. The fifth factor was Arab influence over Islam, 42%, where rest only gave a minor count. This social perception highlights the gruesome reality of Islamist extremism. Therefore, elimination of Islamist extremism will be an uphill tasks but it will result in harmony.

Research then further analysed whether Islamist extremism is a key cause. (See figure 05) The result was the majority of the sample agreed with the fact that Islamist extremism is a key cause resulting in Islamophobia. 68% agreed, while 21% chose 'maybe'. The individuals that have chosen 'maybe' can be ascertained as neutral however comparatively. On the other hand, 11% selected 'no' and they were Muslims (See figure 06). This portrays the importance of reconciliation. The fear factor present in non-Muslims are derived due to Islamist extremism, which is a key reason. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to prevent terrorism, extremism and radicalization. Thus, it is crystal clear that all are victims in the present context. It is not only majority of non-Muslims who face fear due to Islamist extremism, but also Muslims who are criticized and generalized as extremists.

Easter Sunday attack was the recent, ruthless, terrorist and extremist activity which escalated Islamophobia. For that reason, the survey gave the respondents the opportunity of selecting the reason/reasons behind the Easter Sunday attack. (See figure 07) Accordingly, majority of the respondents chose lack of responsibility of the government, National security failure and Islamist extremism. The

percentages are, 76%, 72% and 64% respectively. One of the noticeable findings were the lack of responsibility of the government and national security failure. This displays the government's failure in analyzing current and prospective threats and preventing and eliminating them. For the reasons mentioned above, it is evident that Islamist extremism is a key factor which causes Islamophobia. Various steps can be utilized to eliminate Islamophobia by preventing violence.

Conclusion

After analysing the data gathered by the survey and by perusing the literature available, it is clear that Islamist extremism is a domestic as well as an international threat. Islamist extremism has resulted in Islamophobia, which Sri Lanka faces without a doubt. Non-Muslims fear Islamist extremism and the situation escalated with the Easter Sunday attack 2019. On the other hand, Muslims are victimized because the majority of them are not extremists and guilt free. Out of the causes discussed in the paper, Islamist extremism is a key cause for Islamophobia. Therefore, in order to annihilate Islamophobia, it is pivotal to eliminate Islamophobia and prevent the breach of rights of Muslims.

Recommendations

In order to derive realistic recommendations, respondents were given the liberty to choose multiple factors that might facilitate the annihilation of islamophobia. (See figure 08). 74% chose revisiting laws by amending or repealing them or strengthening laws, 55% chose community engagement by way of de- radicalization, 46% chose rehabilitation of terrorists, 70% mentioned Public awareness, 46% chose convicting terrorists, 67% chose preventing hate speech and false speech, 66% preventing terrorist financing, 52% mentioned creating a knowledge sharing platform among government agencies and private entities and 56% chose monitoring social media and penalizing hate speech. In addition, it is also imperative to monitor and regulate madrasas and ensure inclusive education. This will be a good strategy to prevent polarization. Finally yet importantly, preventing Sinhala extremism and Buddhist extremism is imperative to accomplish nonviolence.

Tables and figures

Figure 01

Do you believe there is a tendency of Sri Lankan Muslim youth being radicalized aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attack ?
100 responses

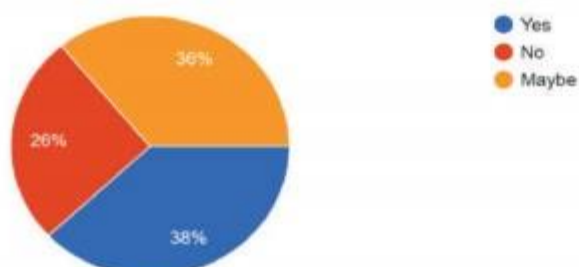


Figure 02

pr

Do you recognize Islamist extremism as an international threat?

100 responses

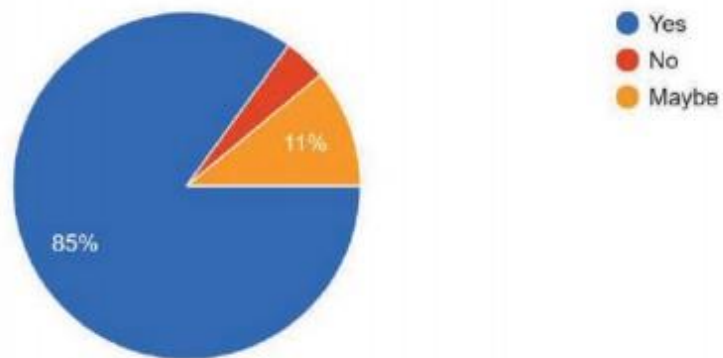


Figure 03

Do you recognize Islamist extremism as a domestic threat in Sri Lanka?

100 responses

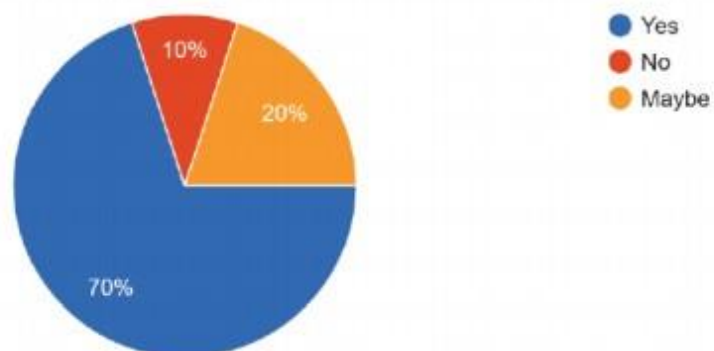


Figure 04

Do you believe Sri Lanka is facing Islamophobia?

100 responses

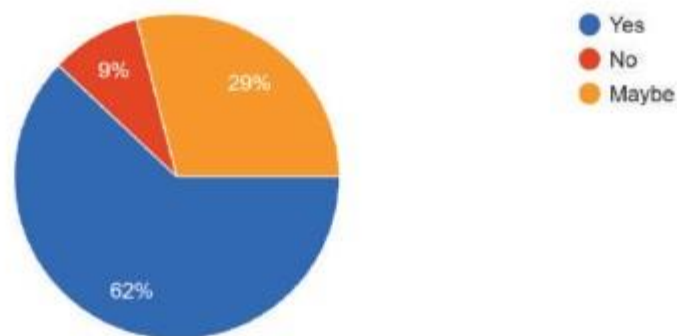


Figure 05

What are the reason behind Islamophobia?

100 responses

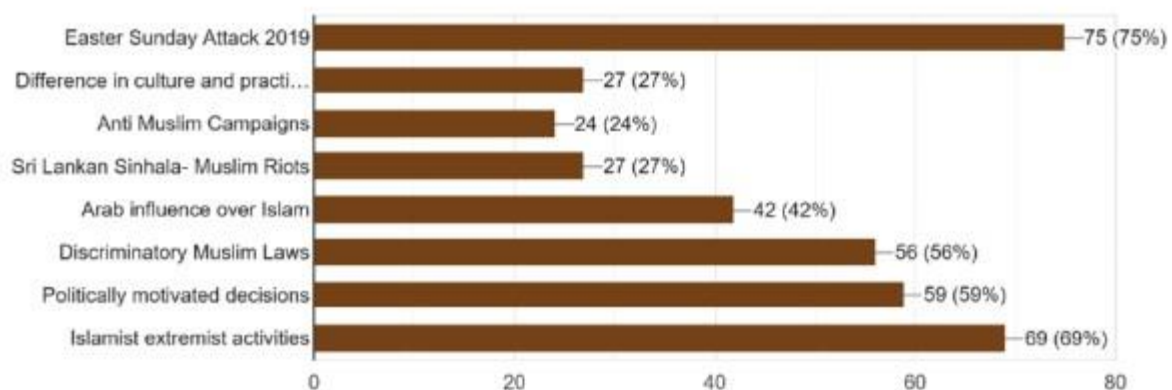


Figure 06

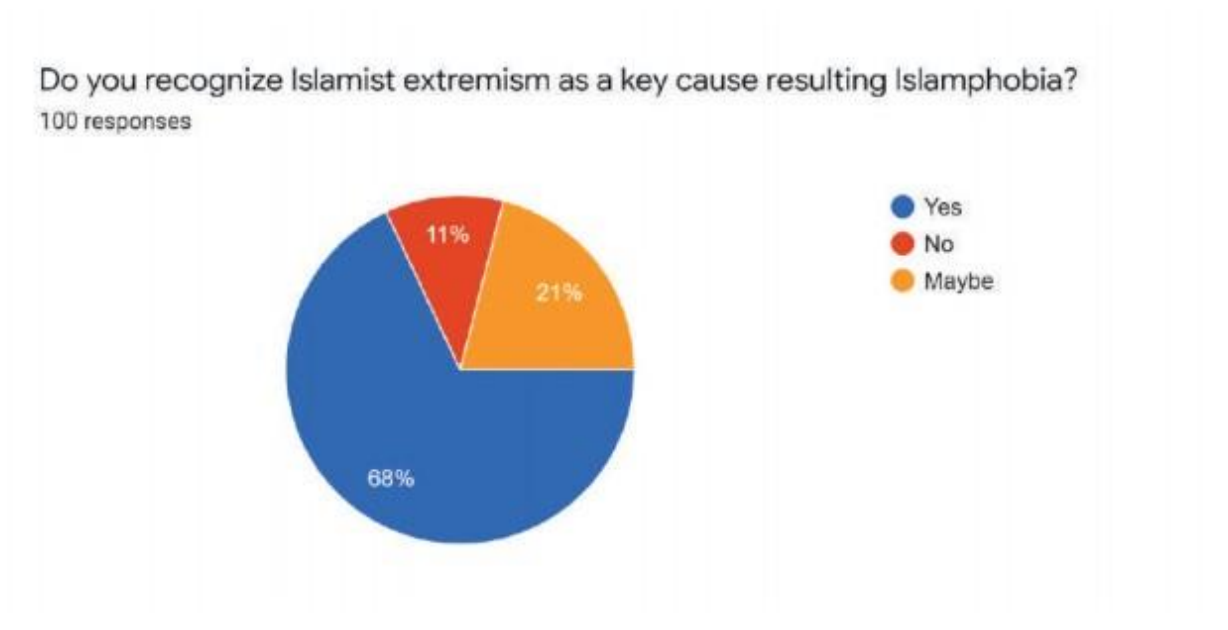


Figure 07

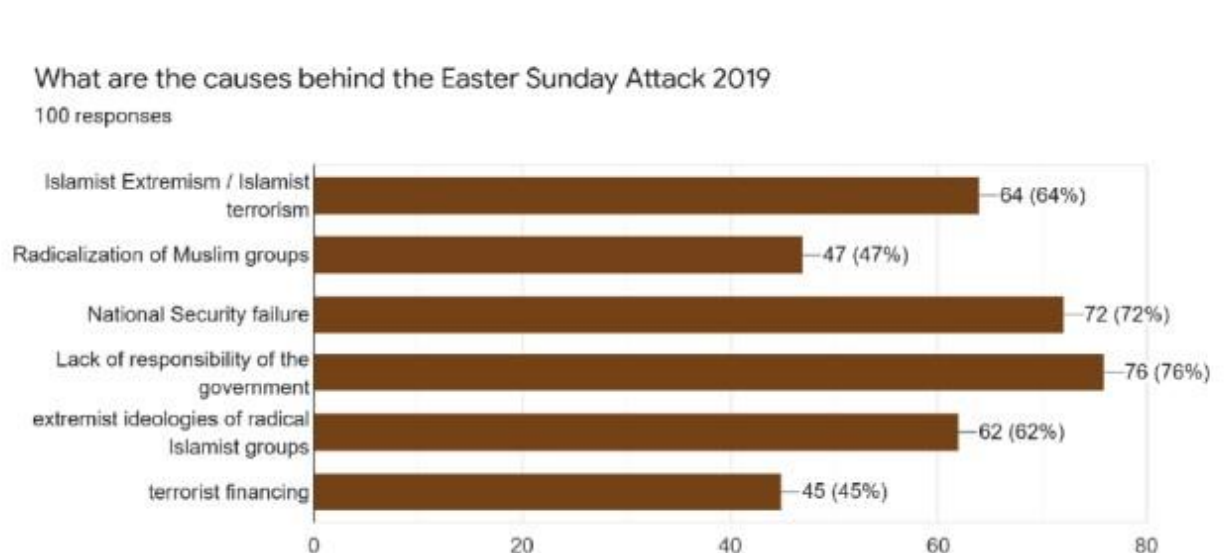
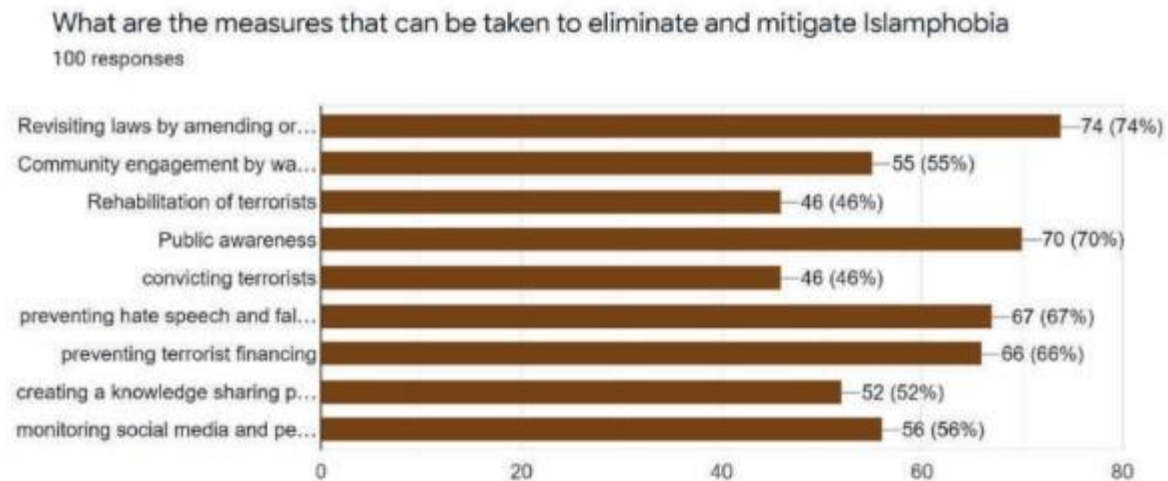


Figure 08



References

- Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1978
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- Prevention of Terrorism Act No 48 of 1979
- Awan, I. and Zempi, I., 2020. *A WORKING DEFINITION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA*. [ebook] Available at: <<http://A WORKING DEFINITION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- Barend Louwrens Prinsloo | (2018) The etymology of “Islamic extremism”: A misunderstood term? *Cogent Social Sciences*, 4:1, 1463815, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2018.1463815
- BBC News. 2022. *Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48218907>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- BBC News. 2022. *Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48218907>> [Accessed 31 January 2022].
- Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses , Vol. 11, No. 6 (June 2019), pp. 8-13 Published by: International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26662255>
- D’Souza, S., Bashar, I., Ramachandran, S. and Gunasingham, A., 2022. SOUTH ASIA: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 14(No. 1), pp.55-89

- Edwards, A., 2015. ISIS and the Challenge of Islamist Extremism. *Political Insight*, 6(1), pp.12-15.
- Govinfo.gov. 2022. - *ISIS IN THE PACIFIC: ASSESSING TERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE THREAT TO THE HOMELAND*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg22758/html/CHRG-114hhrg22758.htm>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- GSDRC. 2022. *Islamist Radicalisation and Development Aid in South Asia - GSDRC*. [online] Available at: <<https://gsdrc.org/document-library/islamist-radicalisation-and-development-aid-in-south-asia/>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- Imtiyaz, A., 2019. The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 55(1), pp.3-16.
- Imtiyaz, A., 2019. The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 55(1), pp.3-16.
- ISD. 2022. *Islamism*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.isdglobal.org/extremism/islamism/>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- Lakshman, K., 2006, *Islamist Radicalisation and Developmental Aid in South Asia*, DIIS Working Paper, no. 8, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen
- Manoharan, N., Chatterjee, D. and Ashok, D., 2021. The New 'Other': Islamic Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation in Sri Lanka. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 77(4), pp.605-621.
- Ohchr.org. 2022. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/Islamophobia-AntiMuslim/Civil%20Society%20or%20Individuals/ProfAwan-2.pdf>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- Satkunanathan, A., 2022. Sri Lanka: Minority Rights within Shrinking Civic Space.
- UN News. 2022. *Sri Lankan authorities must work 'vigorously' to ease simmering ethno-religious tensions, urges UN rights expert*. [online] Available at: <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044931>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- UNDP. 2022. *Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity | United Nations Development Programme*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.undp.org/publications/preventing-violent-extremism-through-inclusive-development-and-promotion-tolerance-and>> [Accessed 29 January 2022].
- Yilmaz, I., 2016. Two Major Challenges to Muslims and the World in the Age of Post-Truth: Islamist Extremism and Islamophobia. *SSRN Electronic Journal*