

What do the People Think about Role of Religious Leaders in Transforming Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka?

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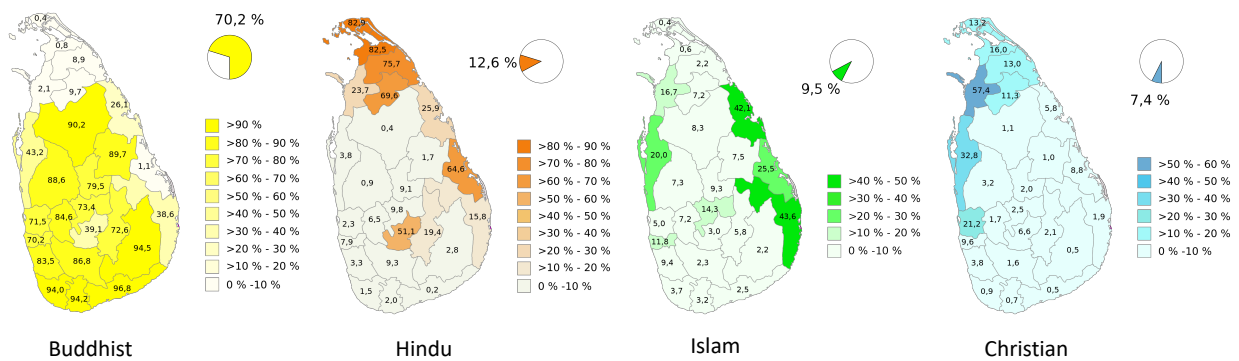
Abstract

Sri Lanka has a strong presence of four major religions and faiths in all walks of life. Acts of violent religious extremism have been reported in Sri Lanka, including the Easter Sunday attacks. Religious leaders can perform a dual role in either contributing to or preventing violent religious extremism. This Facebook survey was conducted from 30 January 2021 – to 09 February 2022 with the aim of eliciting public opinion on the role of religious leaders in transforming violent religious extremism. The total number of respondents was 474, with a large proportion of them being young males from the Colombo district who identified themselves as Sinhala, and Buddhist. Around a quarter of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that a serious act of violent extremism could happen in their community within the next six months. On the other hand, around 40% of the respondents stated that such an act could occur in Sri Lanka was very high or high within the next six months. In addition, over sixty-eight percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that violent religious extremism is increasing in Sri Lanka. The participants were split between their opinion on religion being a contributory factor or a protective factor for violent religious extremism. When inquired if religious leaders create violent religious extremism or aggravate it, over 56% and 58% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed respectively. In sharp contrast, over 84% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that religious leaders could prevent violent religious extremism. In comparison, over 92% strongly agreed or agreed that they could minimize violent religious extremism. Over 65% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the religious leaders were doing enough to prevent or counter violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. The findings of this survey point out the need for religious leaders to be more proactively and effectively engaged in transforming violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka.

Key words: *Violent religious extremism, Easter Sunday Attacks, Transformation*

1. Background:

Sri Lanka is blessed by four major religious traditions along with many other faiths and beliefs. The primary religions in Sri Lanka are Buddhism (70.3 %), Hinduism (12.6 %), Islam (9.7 %), Christianity (6.1 %), and other Christians (1.3%) (United States Department of State, 2019). The distribution of religion in Sri Lanka is closely related to ethnic variation, as shown in the maps in Figure 1(Wikipedia, 2022).



By Furfur - Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka: Population by religion according to districts, 2012. This file was derived from: Ampara district.svg., CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37843532>

Figure 1: Distribution of Religion by Districts in Sri Lanka

Religion plays a significant role in the individual, family, social, and community life in Sri Lanka. For example, as reported by the Nationmaster website, referring to the Gallup Poll of 2014, 99% of Sri Lankans sampled considered religion important in their daily lives, making it the third out of 143 countries regarding secularism (Nationmaster.com, 2014).

The Sri Lankan constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, conscience, religion, and the right to change religion. Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity are all recognized religions under the legislation. Buddhism is given the "foremost place" among the country's religious beliefs in the constitution and other legislation, and the government is committed to maintaining it while respecting the rights of religious minorities (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2020). As a result, Sri Lanka has been a haven for different religions and faith traditions to coexist, grow and flourish while enriching one other through shared cultural practices.

Violent religious extremism refers to advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting violence to further social, economic, and political objectives motivated or justified by religious or

faith-based ideologies (adapted from USAID, 2020). Transformation of violent religious extremism is defined as the addressing the immediate, intermediate and long-term risk factors as well as protective factors for violent religious extremism at all stages of the radicalization and deradicalization processes (Wijesekara, 2022)

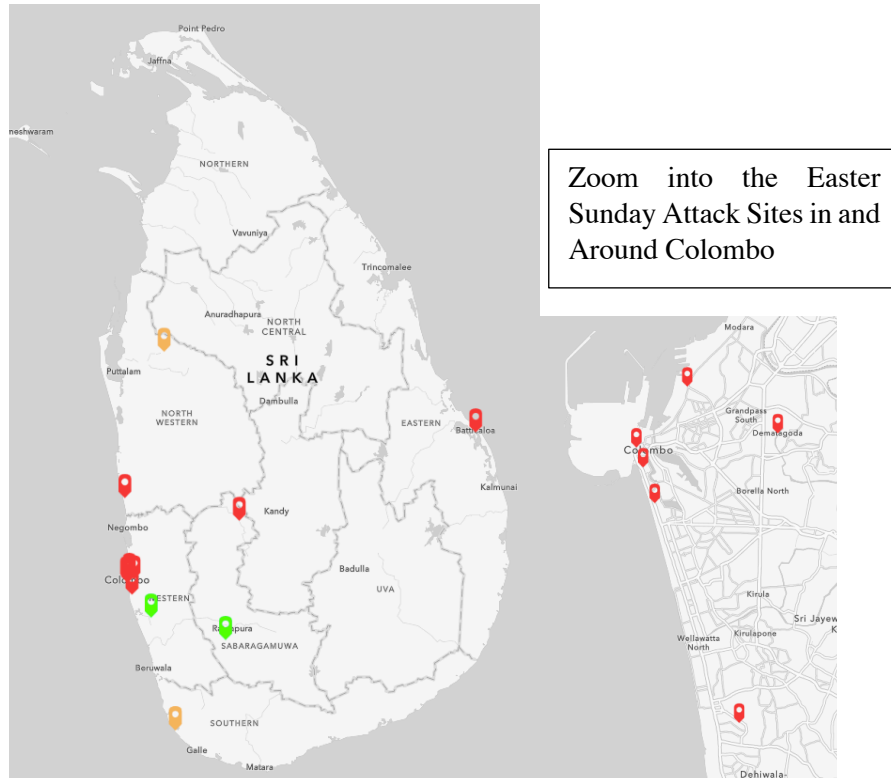
Sri Lanka ended the 30-year-old internal conflict in 2009, primarily based on ethnic identity, claiming many lives and damage to infrastructure and property (Diaz and Murshed, 2013). However, Sri Lanka witnessed several acts of Violent Religious Extremism in the recent past, including the Easter Sunday Attacks (Table 1 and Figure 2).

Table:1 Timeline of Selected Acts of Violent Religious Extremism reported on the Worldwide web

Date of Report	Media Report Extract
10 May 2001	<p>Sinhala Muslim Riots in Mawanella “A racist attack on Muslims in the central hills town of Mawanella provoked angry protests last week by Sri Lanka's Tamil Muslim minority in several regions, including the capital Colombo. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government ordered a police crackdown on the demonstrators and then imposed a curfew in Colombo and the neighbouring Western Province” (Sunil, 2001).</p>
09 December 2012	<p>Attacks on Christian Church in Hambanthota “A mob of about 1,000 people in southern Sri Lanka, led by Buddhist monks, protested the presence of a church by overpowering police, vandalizing property and beating the pastor on Sunday (Dec. 9), Christian sources said.”(Morningstar News, 2012)</p>
12 January 2014	<p>Attacks on Christian Churches in Hikkaduwa “Two churches in Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka were vandalized Sunday by a mob led by Buddhist monks, according to International Christian Concern.”(Worthynews, 2014)</p>
12-15 June 2014	<p>Sinhala Muslim Riots in Aluthgama and Beruwala* “The tensions between Sinhalese and Muslim groups was reported from the Aluthgama and Beruwala areas of Southern Sri Lanka, and are believed to have occurred following an inciteful speech by anti- Muslim Sinhalese extremist group the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). Serious communal violence has broken out in parts of Southern Sri Lanka, leaving three people dead, at least 40 people injured and reports of massive damage to property. Curfew is in force.”(Firstpost, 2014)</p>
14 January 2017	<p>Attack on Christian Prayer Center in “The Kithu Sevana prayer centre is located in a village in north-western Sri Lanka. However, religious services are performed by clergymen who come from other places. On 5 January, a Buddhist monk and a dozen thugs attacked the centre.” (Perera, 2017)</p>

05 March 2018	<p>Sinhala Muslim Riots in Digana* “Violence against the Muslims in Digana erupted on 5th May 2018, spread like a wild fire for next two days and sporadic incidents took place till 9th May 2018. Although the violence for most part remained within the Kandy district, few anti- Muslim violence were reported from far away districts too.”(Sri Lanka Brief, 2018)</p>
7 January 2019	<p>Vandalism of Buddha Statues in Mawanella “In the early hours on the 26th of December, at least two revered statues of Buddha were vandalized in the Delgahagoda village near Mawanella, Sri Lanka, by two Muslim youths. One youth was captured by residents of the house next to the Buddha statue after they heard the sound of breaking glass.” (Kalaung, 2019)</p>
21 April 2019	<p>Easter Sunday Attacks on Churches and Hotels On Easter Sunday, suicide bombers killed at least 253 people and injured some 500 at churches and top-end hotels across Sri Lanka. [...] Evidence is mounting that local jihadists linked to the Islamic State (IS) group carried out the attack, and police have made a number of arrests. (BBC News, 2019)</p>
29 December 2020	<p>Vandalism of Buddha Statues in Mawanella “Several police teams have been deployed to investigate an alleged attack on a Buddha statue at Hingula, Mawanella.”(Times Online, 2020)</p>
27 December 2021	<p>44 Attacks on Objects of Religious Worship Across the Country “We have filed a record in this case, a list of 44 cases of attacks on objects of religious worship in the country, giving the names, places and dates of such attacks. Twenty of these attacks were in 2018, before the reprehensible Didulwatte attack. Of these 20 attacks 18 were against several Mosques, 1 against a Buddha Statue and 1 against a Hindu Kovil, all in 2018 prior to the Mawanella, Didulwatta attack in December 2018.” (Nadeera, 2022)</p>

* Sinhala Muslim Riots could be considered as ethnic than religious in origin. However, it is noteworthy that Muslim ethnic identity largely overlaps with the Islamic religious identity. Hence, these conflicts involve a mixture of ethnic and religious ideologies.



Red: Islam inspired incidents, Orange: Buddhism Inspired Incidents, Green: Sinhala Muslim Incidents

Figure 2: Map of Selected Acts of Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka explosions: What happened



Figure 2: Locations of Easter Sunday Attacks (Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48010697>)

Religious leaders, as spiritual, social, and political opinion leaders, play a decisive role in the generation of extremist ideologies that could escalate into acts of violence and promote peace and harmony despite ethnoreligious diversities. When closely examining the religious landscape of Sri Lanka, engagement of religious leaders in a wide range of projects, initiatives, and programs led both by the government and civil society could be observed. However, evidence of the public perceptions of the role of religious leaders concerning violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka is limited. Therefore, the objective of this Facebook survey was to describe the public opinion on the role of religious leaders towards violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka.

2. Methods:

The online survey comprised of questions on four domains about the role of religious leaders and violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka, as shown in Figure 3.

Perceived Risk of Violent Religious Extremism	Relationship between Religious and Violent Religious Extremism	Associated factors	Role of Religious Leaders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Within the respondents community •Within Sri Lanka •Trends of Violent Religious Extremism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Religion as a Contributor •Responsibility of Religion •Religion as an Encourager •Attribution of extremism to religion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Social Media •Influence of Local Extremist Groups •Influence by global Extremist Groups •Radicalization as an invisible phenomenon •Intra-religious Initiatives •Inter-religious Initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Creator Role •Aggravator Role •Preventor Role •Minimizer Role •Preacher Role •Role Model •Mediator Role •Satisfaction on religious leader engagement

Figure 3: Domains Covered in the Public Opinion Survey on Role of Religious Leaders on Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka

In addition, age, gender, ethnicity, and religion were gathered as background information. The respondents were also asked if they identified themselves as an ordained religious leader, lay religious follower, or not following a religion. Analytics of the social media campaign were also used to summarize the extent of the dissemination and the survey's uptake.

An internal team reviewed the survey for ethical aspects and implemented measures to address them.

The survey was conducted from 30 January 2021 – to 09 February 2022. Three Facebook posts, each in English, Sinhala, and Tamil, were boosted on two occasions to reach the whole country. All questions had the options neither agree nor disagree and no idea. These options were amalgamated in the analysis. The responses were exported as an excel file and were analysed

using SPSS Version 20. The data were summarized as frequencies and percentages. The distribution map of respondents was prepared using ArcGIS Pro 2.0.

An open-ended question was left to express any ideas by respondents on the topic as narrative responses. In addition, the comments provided by the Facebook users to the posts on the surveys were also collected as qualitative data, which are being analysed using the content analysis method, which will be presented in a future publication.

3. Results:

First part of the results section will be devoted to describing selected social media analytics of the survey and background characteristics of the respondents. Next, the findings on public opinion on role of religious leaders in transforming violent religious extremism will be described.

The social media analytics of the posts are shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Analytics of the social media of the Posts of the Survey

Language	Sinhala		Tamil		English		Total
Analytics	Post 1	Post 2	Post 1	Post 2	Post 1	Post 2	Post 1& 2
Post engagement	906	894	930	989	666	697	5082
Link clicks	780	784	824	908	550	618	4464
Post reactions	63	56	56	46	73	42	336
Post comments	35	28	29	5	13	13	123
Post shares	17	19	15	24	22	17	114
Post saves	11	7	6	6	8	7	45
Reach	35712	27031	24720	30144	25104	39320	182031
Reach Break down by Province							
Western Province	14152	10824	5920	7840	10040	13264	62040
Central Province	4208	3088	2456	3320	3120	4208	20400
Southern Province	3952	3488	360	880	1776	2696	13152
North Western Province	3224	2344	1528	2032	1552	2808	13488
Sabaragamuwa Province	2800	2608	712	896	1208	1872	10096
Eastern Province	2432	1232	7136	8424	3256	6528	29008
North Central Province	2016	1528	472	704	792	1240	6752
Northern Province	1504	664	5632	5488	2616	5472	21376
Uva Province	1424	1256	504	560	744	1232	5720

As per Table 1, it is evident that out of 182, 031 posts reached about the survey, 5082 persons have been engaged. This means around 1 out of 35 individuals that the survey has been engaged in the survey. A total of 474 respondents completed the survey. When compared with the post engagement in Table 2, roughly every 10th person who engaged with the survey has completed the survey.

As per the histogram in Figure 4, the largest number of responses were received on 03 February 2022.

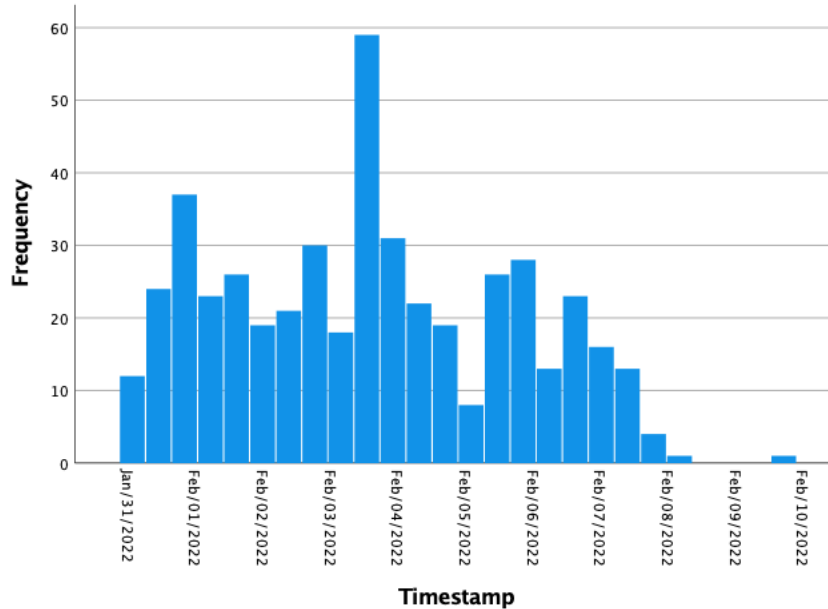


Figure 4: Distribution of Timestamp of Respondents

Table 1: Language of Survey completion

Language	Number	Percentage
English	218	46.0%
Sinhala	171	36.1%
Tamil	85	17.9%
Total	474	100.0%

As per Table 3, it is evident that largest number of respondents took the survey in English language, followed by Sinhala and Tamil.

The distribution of age of the respondents is shown in Figure 5.

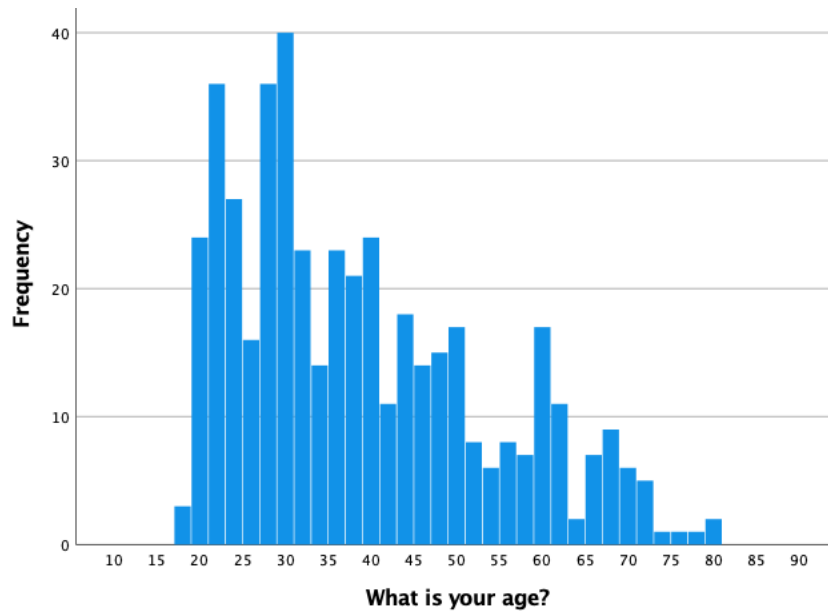


Figure 5: Distribution of Age of Respondents

The age showed a positively skewed distribution with a median of 35 years and an Interquartile Range of 27 – 48 years.

The background characteristics of the population are shown Table 4.

Table 2: Background Characteristics of the Survey Respondents

Variable	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	405	85.4%
Female	58	12.2%
Prefer not to say	11	2.3%
Total	474	100.0%
Ethnicity		
Sinhala	263	55.5%
Sri Lankan Tamil	52	11.0%
Indian Tamil	5	1.1%
Sri Lanka Moor	123	25.9%
Other	31	6.5%
Total	474	100.0%
Religion		
Buddhist	192	40.5%
Hindu	36	7.6%
Christian	11	2.3%
Roman Catholic	27	5.7%
Islam	134	28.3%
Atheist/Areligious	50	10.5%
Other	24	5.0%
Total	474	100.0%
Identification in Relation to Religious Hierarchy		
Ordained religious leader	41	8.6%
Lay religious follower	314	66.2%
Not following a religion	119	25.1%
Total	474	100.0%

Over 85% of the respondents were male. Sinhala (55.5%) and Sri Lankan Moor (25.9%) comprised the ethnicity of most of the respondents. Similarly, around 40% of the respondents identified their religion as Buddhism, followed by 28% Islam and 8% Christianity or Roman Catholicism, while 7.6% identified as Hinduism. Over 10% of the respondents identified them as atheists or areligious.

The respondents comprised 8.6% of ordained religious leaders, while 66% identified as lay religious followers. Over a quarter of the respondents identified them as not following a religion concerning a religious hierarchy.

The geographical distribution of the respondents is shown in Figure 6.

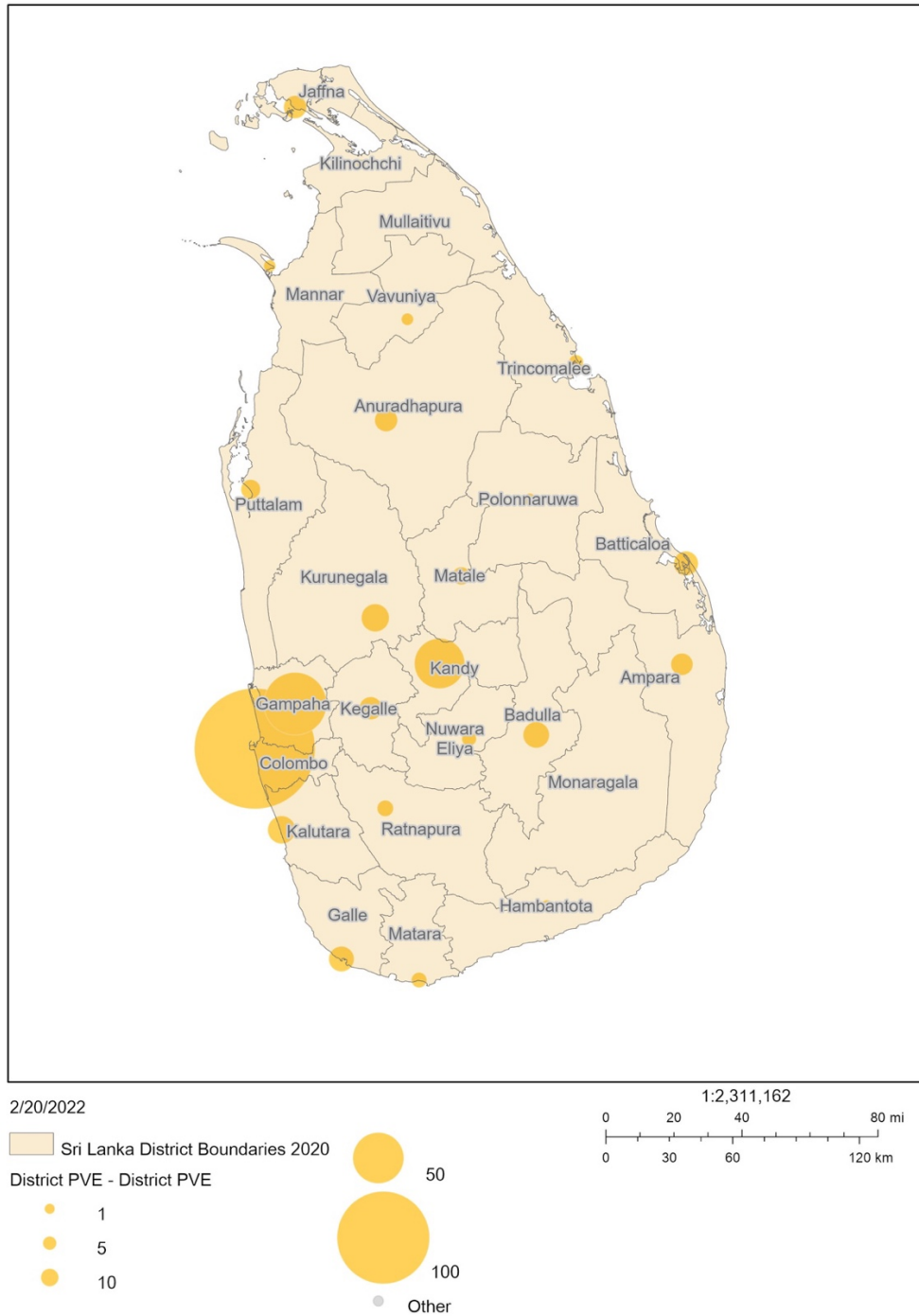


Figure 6: District Distribution of Survey Respondents

The largest number of respondents to the survey have been from the Colombo District, followed by the Gampaha and the Kandy Districts. Except for the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, all 23 out of 25 administrative districts of Sri Lanka have been represented by the survey respondents.

"Within the next six months, what do you think about the possibility of a serious act of violent religious extremism to occur in your community?"

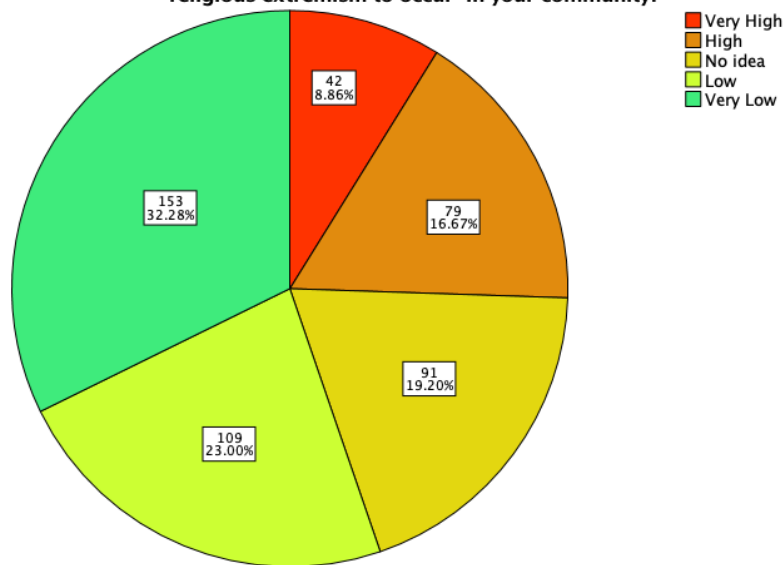


Figure 7

As per Figure 7, around a quarter of the respondents stated that they either strongly agreed or agreed that a serious act of violent extremism could occur in their community within the next six months. On the other

hand, over 55% of the respondents stated that the possibility of such an act would be very low or low. Around 20% indicated that they did not have an idea about the statement.

"Within the next six months, what do you think about the possibility of a serious act of violent religious extremism to occur in Sri Lanka?"

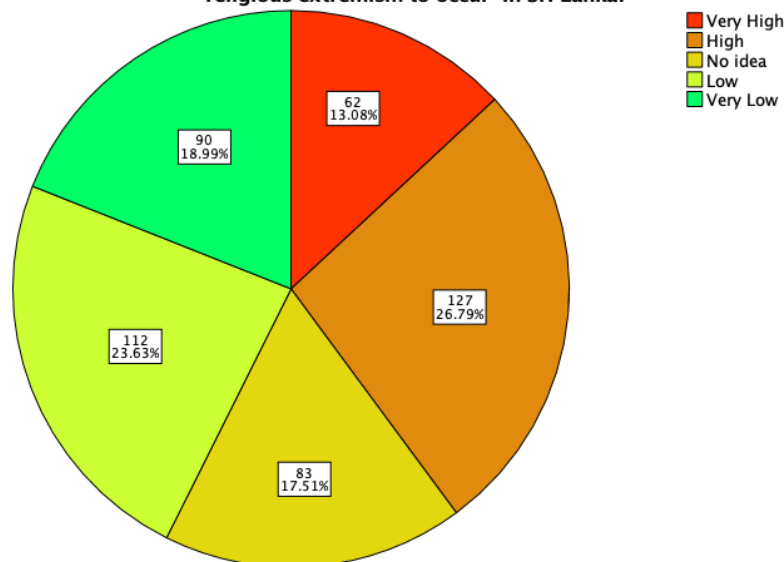


Figure 8

However, as shown in Figure 8, when the respondents expressed their opinion about the possibility of a serious act of violent extremism happening in Sri Lanka, a different pattern was

observed. Around 40% of the respondents stated that the chance of such an act could occurring in Sri Lanka was very high or high within the next six months. On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who said that the possibility of such an act was very low or low fell to around 43%. Still, about 17% did not have an idea about the statement.

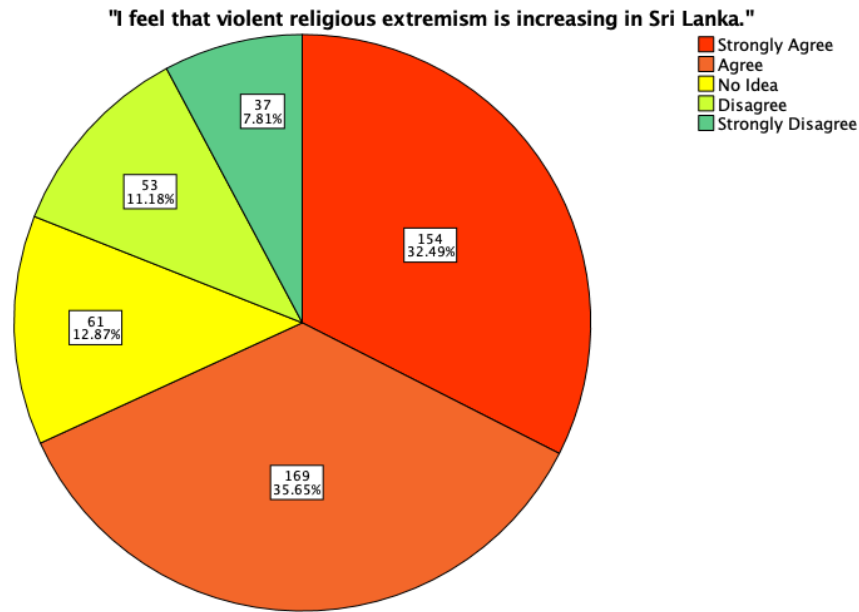


Figure 9

As shown in Figure 9, over sixty-eight percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that violent religious extremism is increasing in Sri Lanka. Only around 18% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement. Less than 13% of the respondents stated that they had no idea about the same.

Table 3: Response to Statements of Relationship between Religion and Violent Religious Extremism

Response	Frequency	Percent
“Religions contribute to Violent Extremism in Sri Lanka”		
Strongly Agree	135	28.5
Agree	145	30.6
Neutral or no idea	41	8.6
Disagree	76	16.0
Strongly Disagree	77	16.2
Total	474	100
"Religions are responsible for violent extremism in Sri Lanka"		
Strongly Agree	109	23.0
Agree	124	26.2
Neutral	42	8.9
Disagree	98	20.7
Strongly Disagree	101	21.3
Total	474	100
"Religions do not encourage violent extremism."		
Strongly Agree	139	29.3
Agree	111	23.4
Neutral	47	9.9
Disagree	126	26.6
Strongly Disagree	51	10.8
Total	474	100
"Acts of violence in the name of religion only by very few should not be attributed to religion."		
Strongly Agree	203	42.8
Agree	135	28.5
Neutral	27	5.7
Disagree	77	16.2
Strongly Disagree	32	6.8
Total	474	100

Over 58% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement concerning the contribution of religion and Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka. In contrast, only 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement. Only less than 9% of the respondents were neutral or had no idea about the statement.

Around 49% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that religion was responsible for Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka, while only 42% disagreed or disagreed. Again, those who were neutral or had no idea was around 9% of the respondents.

Around 52% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that religions do not encourage Violent Religious Extremism. In contrast, only 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same. The percentage of neutral or had no idea remained less than 10%.

We inquired about the respondents' opinion on the attribution of acts of violence conducted in the name of religion led by a few to the religion. Over 61% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that such acts of violence by a minority should not be attributed to religion. On the other hand, there were around 27% believed that such acts by a minority still need to be attributed to the religion. Those who were neutral or had no idea fell to less than 6% for this statement.

Table 4: Response to the Statement: "Internet and social media are helping to spread violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka."

Response	Number	Percentage
Strongly Agree	181	38.2%
Agree	192	40.5%
Neutral	54	11.4%
Disagree	43	9.1%
Strongly Disagree	4	0.8%
Total	474	100.0

Over 78% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the Internet and social media were helping to spread violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. Only around 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, while only 11% were neutral or had no idea on the same.

Table 5: Response to the Statement "Individuals are being radicalized by violent religious extremists in Sri Lanka at present."

Response	Number	Percentage
Strongly Agree	117	24.7%
Agree	228	48.1%
Neutral	94	19.8%
Disagree	23	4.9%
Strongly Disagree	12	2.5%
Total	474	100.0%

Over 73% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that individuals are being radicalized by violent religious extremists in Sri Lanka. Around 20% of the respondents stated that they were either neutral or had no idea about the statement. Only less than 8% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table 6: Responses to the Statement "Even if we do not see acts of violent religious extremism, radicalization can happen silently."

Response	Number	Percentage
Strongly Agree	155	32.7%
Agree	246	51.9%
Neutral	51	10.8%
Disagree	14	3.0%
Strongly Disagree	8	1.7%
Total	474	100.0%

Around 85% of the respondents stated that they either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that radicalization is happening in the absence of acts of violent religious extremism. Less than 5% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement, while around 11% were neutral or had no idea.

Table 7: Factors Contributing to Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
Propaganda by domestic violent religious extremist movements	303	63.9
Propaganda by international violent religious extremist movements	268	56.5
Current government policies	234	49.4
Lack of education	232	48.9
Religious educational institutions	206	43.5
Poor minority/majority relationships	204	43.0
Agitation by political groups	204	43.0
Poor economic status	180	38.0
Strong religious faith	178	37.6
In-country oppression	157	33.1
Mental illness	137	28.9
Unethical conversions	122	25.7
Poor life skills	116	24.5
Unpleasant childhood experiences	114	24.1
International oppression	89	18.8

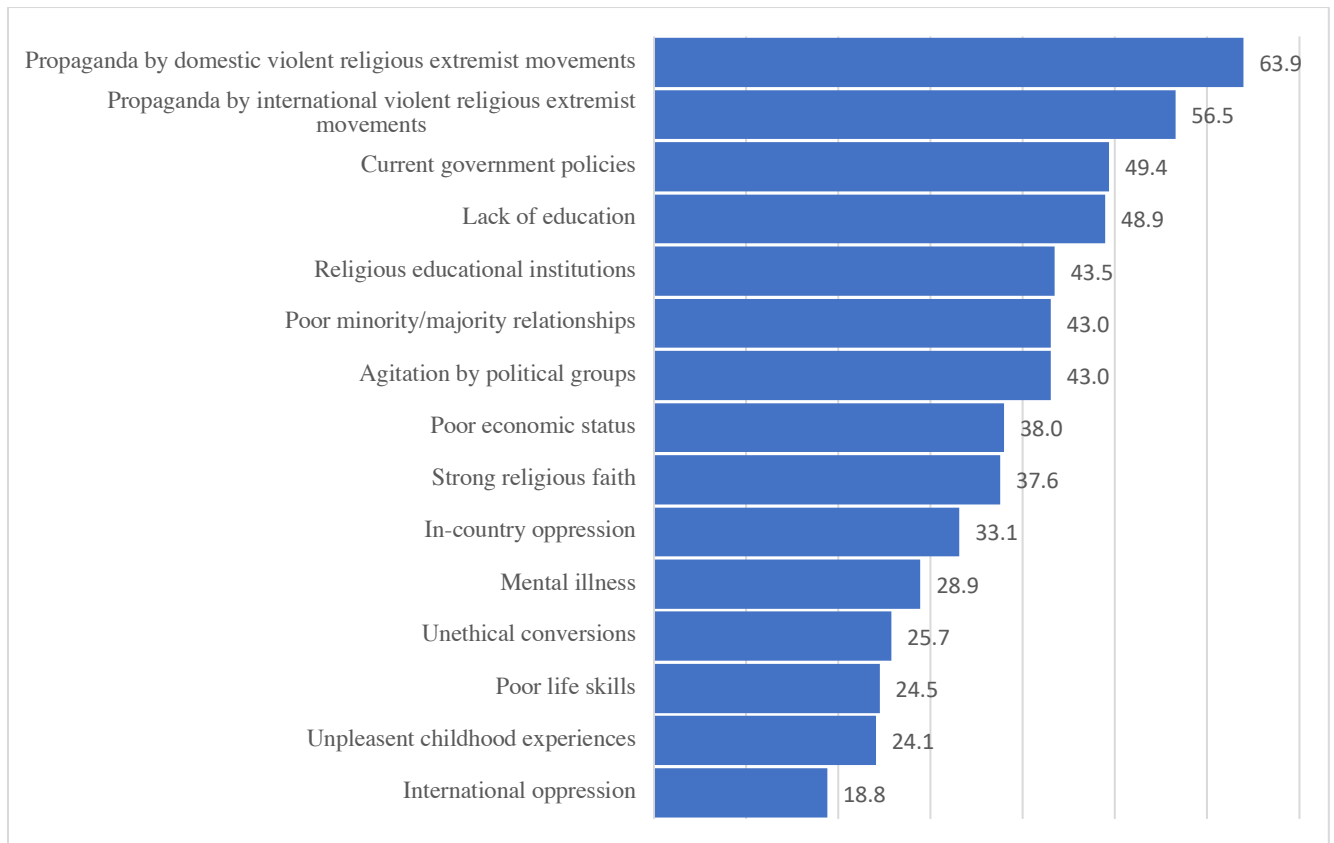


Figure 10 : Factors Contributing to Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka

The most common factors that the respondents believed that were contributing to violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka were propaganda by domestic violent religious extremist groups (303, 63.9%) and propaganda by international violent religious extremist groups (268, 56.5%), current government policies (234, 49.4%), lack of education (48.9%) and religious educational institutions (43.5%), poor minority/majority relationships (43.5%) and agitation by political groups (43.0%).

Table 8: Responses on Statements related to Religious Leadership and Violent Religious Extremism

Response	Number	Percentage
"Religious leaders create violent religious extremism."		
Strongly Agree	98	20.7%
Agree	169	35.7%
Neutral	92	19.4%
Disagree	75	15.8%
Strongly Disagree	40	8.4%
Total	474	100.0
"Religious leaders aggravate violent religious extremism."		
Strongly Agree	102	21.5%
Agree	178	37.6%
Neutral	84	17.7%
Disagree	73	15.4%
Strongly Disagree	37	7.8%
Total	474	100.0%
"Religious leaders can prevent violent religious extremism."		
Strongly Agree	217	45.8%
Agree	184	38.8%
Neutral	36	7.6%
Disagree	29	6.1%
Strongly Disagree	8	1.7%
Total	474	100.0%
"Religious leaders can minimize violent religious extremism."		
Strongly Agree	230	48.5%
Agree	208	43.9%
Neutral	23	4.9%
Disagree	10	2.1%
Strongly Disagree	3	0.6%
Total	474	100.0%

Over 56% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that religious leaders create violent religious extremism. Around 20% of the respondents either were neutral or had no idea in this

regard. However, around 24% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement.

When inquired if the religious leaders aggravate violent religious extremism, over 58% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed. Around 15% of respondents remained neutral or had no idea in this regard. Approximately 23% either disagreed or strongly disagreed in the meantime.

The role of religious leaders in the prevention or minimization of violent religious extremism was asked next. Over 84% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that religious leaders could prevent violent religious extremism, while over 92% strongly agreed or agreed that they could minimize it. In contrast, less than 8% and 3% of the respondents only strongly disagreed or disagreed that religious leaders could prevent or mitigate violent religious extremism, respectively. Only less than 6% of the respondents stayed neutral or had no idea about the same statements.

Table 9: Responses on Intra-Religious and Inter-Religious Initiatives to Stop Violent Religious Extremism

Reponses	Number	Percentage
"Violent religious extremism should be stopped by within the religion."		
Strongly Agree	215	45.4%
Agree	165	34.8%
Neutral	53	11.2%
Disagree	24	5.1%
Strongly Disagree	17	3.6%
Total	474	100.0%
"Violent religious extremism could be stopped by inter-religious dialog."		
Strongly Agree	156	32.9%
Agree	158	33.3%
Neutral	77	16.2%
Disagree	65	13.7%
Strongly Disagree	18	3.8%
Total	474	100.0%

The respondents were inquired about their opinion about the beginning of efforts to stop violent religious extremism within the religion or between religions. Eighty percent of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that violent religious extremism should be stopped by within the religion. On the other hand, 67% either strongly agreed or agreed that it should be stopped by interreligious dialog. Around 9% disagreed or strongly agreed that violent religious extremism should be contained within the religion, while less than 4% believed the same for interreligious dialog. Around 11% and 16% respectively remained neutral or had no idea about the statements about intrareligious or interreligious approaches.

Table 10: Role of Religious Leaders in the Management of Violent Religious Extremism

Response	Number	Percentage
“Preaching by religious leaders helps reduce violent extremism.”		
Strongly Agree	122	25.7%
Agree	189	39.9%
Neutral	85	17.9%
Disagree	66	13.9%
Strongly Disagree	12	2.5%
Total	474	100.0
“Religious leaders should be role models in promoting peace.”		
Strongly Agree	298	62.9%
Agree	144	30.4%
Neutral	25	5.3%
Disagree	3	0.6%
Strongly Disagree	4	0.8%
Total	474	100.0
"Religious leaders should be mediators in crisis between religions."		
Strongly Agree	242	51.1%
Agree	163	34.4%
Neutral	41	8.6%
Disagree	19	4.0%
Strongly Disagree	9	1.9%
Total	474	100.0

The opinion on the role of religious leaders on the management of violent religious extremism was inquired. Over 65% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the role of religious leaders in reducing violent extremism. Eighteen and sixteen percent of the respondents were neutral or had no idea or disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Over 93% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that religious leaders should be role models in promoting peace. Only 5% were neutral or had no idea about the statement, while only less than 2 % either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement.

Regarding the mediator role of religious leaders concerning violent religious extremism, over 85% either agreed or strongly agreed. Around 9% were neutral or had no idea. Only 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed about the statement on the mediator role of religious leaders about violent religious extremism.

Table 11: Responses to the Statement: "I think religious leaders are doing enough to prevent or counter violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka."

Response	Number	Percentage
Strongly Agree	21	4.4%
Agree	68	14.3%
Neutral	74	15.6%
Disagree	180	38.0%
Strongly Disagree	131	27.6%
Total	474	100.0%

Over 65% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the religious leaders were doing enough to prevent or counter violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. Only 18% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that the religious leaders were doing enough in this regard. Around 16% of the respondents remained neutral or had no idea about the same.

4. Discussion

Religion or faith has been a critical component of Sri Lankan society, with many favourable impacts on its culture, traditions, and education. Nevertheless, violent religious extremism has been a downside of the religion or faith, at least in its lived form. None of the major faiths in existence in the country does promote violence as a means of promoting or propagating itself from a scriptural point of view. We had four assumptions based on which this survey and the results should be interpreted on:

1. A vast majority of religious leaders and groups use peaceful and non-violent means to address their concerns concerning their religious beliefs and acts based on them.
2. A tiny minority of religious groups emerge and even dissociate from the extensive majority group, which will use acts of violent religious extremism to addressing their issues.
3. The vast majority of religious leaders and groups have a decisive role in preventing the emergence of violent religious extremist ideologies within or in the association of their congregations.
4. Religious leaders have an essential role in minimizing harm and damage even after acts of violent religious extremism.

Violent religious extremism has been a hot topic that has been discussed both on the mainstream and on social media, especially in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. However, it should be noted that acts of violent religious extremism have been happening, at least sporadically, by other religiously motivated groups, as evidenced by Table 1 and Figure 2. Therefore, this online public opinion survey was carried out to obtain some insights from the public on their perceptions of the role of religious leaders in transforming violent religious extremism within and beyond their religious or faith groups and congregations.

The study participants were recruited through a Facebook advertisement campaign which was boosted on two occasions. Over the ten-day survey period, the largest number of responses were received around 3rd - 4th February, including Independence Day, a national public holiday. Even though the survey was boosted on two occasions, multiple waves could be observed, probably due to the three languages in which the survey was boosted simultaneously.

The social media analytics show that one out of 35 persons reached out engaged in the post, which means that it created some interest on the topic to the viewer of the post on their wall. On the other hand, one out of ten viewers who engaged with the post completed the survey. Therefore, it was possible to engage 474 respondents to complete the survey at the end. When boosting the social media posts using Facebook, we targeted the Facebook users in Sri Lanka. Assuming these 474 respondents to be a random sample of Facebook users from Sri Lanka, for a population proportion of 50%, for a 95% confidence interval, the margin of error was found to be 4.50%, indicating that the population parameter falls within +/- 4.50% of the surveyed value (Calculator.net, 2022). Even though Facebook uses complex algorithms in the recruitment of survey participants in their advertisement campaigns, it seems that the survey sample is sufficiently sized to make population estimates for the social media users in Sri Lanka.

The survey was deployed in English, Sinhala, and Tamil languages. The survey uptake was highest for the English language, followed by Sinhala and Tamil. English respondents would likely have also taken the survey in either Sinhala or English, but they prefer the English language when taking a survey.

Figure 5 shows that the respondents' age shows a positively skewed distribution towards younger ages, indicating a mixture of the distribution of the age of Facebook users in general and their interest in the survey subject.

One salient feature of the respondents is that over 85% of the respondents are male. The poor interest in the issue by the females warrants further research. Nevertheless, the sample had a reasonable representation of the ethnic and religious distribution of the country. It is also interesting that the sample comprised 8.6% of ordained religious leaders.

Another critical feature was over 10% of the respondents identified themselves as atheists or areligious, while over 25% identified themselves as not following a religion concerning a religious hierarchy. This finding is in strong contrast to previous studies where 99% of Sri Lankans considered religion an essential part of their daily lives, making it the third out of 143 countries concerning secularism (Nationmaster.com, 2014). These figures would probably raise red flags about the young generation distancing itself from religion and its hierarchical organization.

The largest number of respondents have been from the Colombo district. Except for the two districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, all administrative districts being represented in the sample provides evidence of the island's broad geographic generalizability of the findings of the survey. The lack of responses from the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts despite the survey being deployed in Tamil raises at least some concerns over if violent religious extremism not being an essential concern in these areas.

As a proxy indicator of the public perception of the risk of violent religious extremism, we inquired from the respondents how likely it would be for such an act to occur in their community and the country. Around a quarter of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that a serious act of violent extremism could happen in their community within the next six months. On the other hand, around 40% of the respondents stated that such an act could occur in Sri Lanka was very high or high within the next six months. In addition, over sixty-eight percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that violent religious extremism is increasing in Sri Lanka. These findings point to the fact that the risk of acts of violent religious extremism is a perceived risk among a sizeable proportion of the survey respondents.

Through a series of questions with responses on a Likert scale, we tried to elicit public perceptions about the relationship between the contribution, responsibility, encouragement, and attribution of religion and violent religious extremism. We found that public opinion was clearly divided into these areas. Over 58% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement about the contribution of religion and Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka. Around 49% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that religion was responsible for Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, around 52% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that religions do not encourage Violent Religious Extremism. Furthermore, over 61% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that such acts of violence by a minority should not be attributed to religion. Therefore, any programs concerning the transformation of violent religious extremism must consider this contrast of opinion existing in the Sri Lankan society.

Social media plays a critical role in the propaganda by violent extremist groups (Thompson, 2011). In the current survey, over 78% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the Internet and social media are helping to spread violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. The need

to engage social media effectively in counteracting violent religious extremist ideologies is highlighted by this finding.

Even though violent religious extremism is occasionally exposed through overt acts, such as those shown in Table 1 and Figure 2 in Sri Lanka, it is a phenomenon that is occurring in society as a continuous process. Over 73% of the respondents of the current online social media survey either strongly agreed or agreed that violent religious extremists are radicalizing individuals in Sri Lanka at present. Similarly, around 85% of the respondents stated that they either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that radicalization is happening in the absence of acts of violent religious extremism. These findings point to the need to address the violent religious extremism as a critical problem that is continuing despite the overt acts of violence being shown.

Factors contributing to violent extremism have been studied widely across the world. During the current survey, we inquired about the perception of the contribution of some such factors to violent religious extremism. As shown in Table 9 and Figure 10, the most common factors that the respondents believed that were contributing to violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka were propaganda by domestic violent religious extremist groups (303, 63.9%) and propaganda by international violent religious extremist groups (268, 56.5%), current government policies (234, 49.4%), lack of education (48.9%) and religious educational institutions (43.5%), poor minority/majority relationships (43.5%) and agitation by political groups (43.0%). A recent publication by RAND Corporation on Violent Extremism in America highlighted some key findings about factors associated with such extreme behaviours (Brown et al., 2021):

1. Negative life events are part of, but not the sole cause of, radicalization
2. Those with mental health challenges often had difficulty accessing care
3. The enduring appeal of extremist groups seems to lie in attending to fundamental human needs
4. Radical ideology and involvement in extremist activities have addictive properties for many
5. Recruitment to radical groups deliberately leverages psychological vulnerabilities
6. Extremist groups nurture a self-reinforcing social milieu
7. Both radicalization and deradicalization are linked to "being in the right place at the right time"
8. Heavy-handed attempts by formal institutions to deradicalize individuals often fail
9. Stigmatization of groups seems mostly to push at-risk individuals further down the extremist path
10. Media literacy, access to diverse sources of information, and positive experiences with diversity appear critical for deradicalization

Propaganda by violent extremist groups that have been perceived as a contributory factor by most of the respondents in the current survey has been identified as a key contributory factor by Brown et al., 2021 as well.

The focus of this survey has been the role of religious leaders in the transformation of violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. When inquired if religious leaders create violent religious extremism or aggravate it, over 56% and 58% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with it. In sharp contrast, over 84% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that religious leaders could prevent violent religious extremism. In comparison, over 92% strongly agreed or agreed that they could minimize violent religious extremism. These findings show the decisive positive role expected from the religious leaders by the respondents in prevention and the minimization

of violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. Since the survey has a reasonable sample size and an island wide representation, its findings could be generalized at least to the social media users of the country.

In addressing violent religious extremism, two approaches could be adopted: intra-religious and inter-religious. Intra-religious approaches are implemented within the formal and informal religious or faith traditions to prevent or manage violent religious extremism with the engagement of religious leaders and followers. For example, some initiatives provide clarifications or correct explanations to religious texts that extremists misuse to promote violence against the leaders and followers of a given religion by religious scholars, leaders, or institutions. These could be considered intrareligious interventions to address violent extremism. On the other hand, inter-religious approaches aim to engage religious leaders and followers from different faiths to discuss, share, and clarify religious teachings so that mutual trust and confidence can be built between their religions. In the study sample of respondents, eighty percent of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that violent religious extremism should be stopped within the religion. On the other hand, 67% either strongly agreed or agreed that it should be stopped by interreligious dialog. These findings suggest a comprehensive strategy that involves reforms within each religion to prevent the emergence of violent extremism and inter-religious approaches to provide more opportunities to increase mutual understanding, appreciation, confidence, and trust.

There are several specific ways that religious leaders could contribute to transforming violent religious extremism. Some of them are preaching to congregations to reduce violent extremism, being role models for promoting peace and being mediators in crises between religions. Over 65%, 93%, and 85% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed on the above three specific ways that the role of religious leaders could be operationalized in transforming violent religious extremism.

The respondents were inquired if religious leaders were doing enough to prevent or counter violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. Over 65% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement, indicating the need for religious leaders to be more proactively and effectively engaged in addressing violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka.

We also would like to place in a note some limitations of this online social media survey:

1. The survey respondents were limited to those who are using Facebook. This the generalizability of the findings to the general population of Sri Lanka, including those who do not use Facebook, is limited. A more representative sampling method coupled with in-person interviews would have provided more representative results.
2. The descriptive responses provided to the open-ended question were not included in this report. They will be analyzed using qualitative methods and reported later.
3. There are many other sources of public opinion on the role of violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka, which were not included in the current survey. For example, social media posts on the subject provide a rich collection of evidence. Such detailed studies are recommended in the future.

In summary, this online social media survey on the role of religious leaders in transforming violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka provides some valuable insights into the public mindset. The results clearly demonstrate that acts of violent religious extremism are a real risk that is

perceived by a fair percentage of respondents. The respondents also confirmed that radicalization by violent religious extremists is happening even despite the overt acts of violence occurring at a given time. The respondents confirmed the dual role of religious leaders in the escalation or the prevention of violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka. The respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with religious leaders' current level of engagement in the prevention or control of violent religious extremism, calling for their deeper and meaningful engagement both through interreligious and intrareligious approaches.

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