

Sri Lankan Intelligence and Room for Improvement

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Introduction

Intelligence failures have long defined the security architecture of South Asia. From the Mumbai attacks in 2008 to the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, these events underscore the vital, yet often flawed role intelligence plays in national security. In Sri Lanka, the Easter Sunday tragedy exposed deep vulnerabilities within the intelligence community, highlighting critical areas needing urgent reform.

Understanding Intelligence Failures

Before analyzing Sri Lanka's case, it is important to grasp the broader concept of intelligence failure. Intelligence failure can stem from breakdowns in communication, bureaucratic structure and behavior, faulty estimates and analysis, insufficient warning, or poor policy and judgment (Betts, 1978). Since the intelligence cycle covering planning, collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination operates as a sequence, any breakdown can have disastrous consequences (Lowenthal, 2019).



Diagram: Intelligence Cycle (Rocha, 2015)

Scholars such as Amarnath Amarasingam (2019) identified analytical and dissemination failures as central causes of the Easter Sunday Attacks in Sri Lanka. Intelligence was available but either misinterpreted or poorly distributed among decision-makers, avoiding preventive action.

Structural Weaknesses in Sri Lankan Intelligence

The Sri Lankan intelligence community primarily consists of six key organizations with overlapping functions, although not limited to these agencies. They are:

1. Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI)
2. State Intelligence Services (SIS)
3. Sri Lanka Naval Intelligence (SLNI)
4. Sri Lanka Air Force Intelligence (SLAI)
5. Terrorism Investigation department (TID) – Considered as an investigation Unit
6. Criminal Investigation Department (CID) – Considered as an investigation unit

The disjointed structure of the Sri Lankan intelligence community lacks centralized command and effective coordination among the agencies which limits the information sharing between the agencies. Although the Chief of National Intelligence (CNI) is appointed through Cabinet approval, the role lacks constitutional authority to direct tactical or operational activities, relegating it to a mere coordinating function. The final report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Easter Attacks (2021) highlighted this failure by emphasizing that actionable intelligence received from Indian authorities was not correctly shared or acted upon.

Consequences of Fragmentation

This lack of centralized control has multiple consequences:

- **Duplication of Functionality:** Agencies often perform overlapping tasks, wasting scarce human and material resources.
- **Weak Information Sharing:** Agencies operate in silos, inhibiting comprehensive threat assessments.
- **Ad-hoc Decision-Making:** Without robust analytical frameworks, intelligence inputs remain raw, leading to short-term, reactive policymaking rather than strategic foresight.

As Britten (2018) notes, without an effective analytical process, intelligence products remain underdeveloped and reactive. In Sri Lanka, this ad hoc environment of intelligence limits the capacity for threat forecasting and strategic policy guidance.

Legal Vacuum and Its Impact

Another serious flaw lies in the absence of a modern legal framework governing intelligence operations. The Official Secrets Act of 1955, designed primarily to protect classified documents, is outdated and irrelevant to the current threat landscape. Meanwhile, although the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) provided temporary legitimacy during the civil war, it is no longer appropriate for peacetime intelligence operations.

Currently, intelligence officers and their sources operate without sufficient legal protection. Attempts to introduce a comprehensive Intelligence Act have repeatedly stalled due to political inertia (Jayaratne, 2024).

The lack of a defined legal framework for intelligence activities presents a number of major issues to national security and democratic governance. Without clear legal mandates, intelligence services frequently operate in a grey area, resulting in issues of accountability, overreach, and human rights violations (Born et al., 2011). Intelligence personnel and their sources are not legally protected, exposing them to personal risks and affecting motivation and enlistment (Gill & Phythian, 2012).

Furthermore, without legal constraints, intelligence activities may violate civil liberties, undermining public trust in government institutions (Chesterman, 2007). Operational inefficiencies also emerge: intelligence sharing becomes haphazard, agency coordination deteriorates, and strategic intelligence collecting suffers (Walsh, 2010). As Sri Lanka's post-war scenario demonstrates, in the absence of an updated legislative framework, intelligence agencies struggle to react to emerging threats including as transnational terrorism, cyber-attacks, and organized crime. In the long run, the lack of a legal framework jeopardizes national security while simultaneously undermining the rule of law and democratic resilience.

Leadership Struggles and Internal Rivalries

The post-war period¹ has witnessed intense competition among intelligence agencies, with some seeking dominance based on their wartime achievements. As Larry L. Watts (2004) observes, intelligence reform often becomes a “back burner” issue during political transitions, and Sri Lanka is no exception. Internal rivalries have discouraged information

¹ Sri Lanka has been fighting with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since 1983 to 2009. The Sri Lankan Government security forces dismantled the LTTE by killing Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE on 18th May 2009.

sharing and promoted a culture of negative competition within the intelligence community, further weakening its overall effectiveness.

Conclusion: A Call for Reform

Sri Lanka's intelligence community stands at a critical crossroads. To address its deep-rooted inefficiencies, several steps are urgently needed:

- **Empowering the Chief of National Intelligence** with operational and tactical authority.
- **Establishing a Centralized Intelligence Framework** that eliminates duplication and promotes information sharing.
- **Drafting and Enacting a Comprehensive Intelligence Act** that clearly defines the mandate, accountability, and legal protections for intelligence personnel and operations.
- **Fostering a Culture of Strategic Analysis** rather than ad hoc survival-based decision-making.
- **Curbing Inter-Agency Rivalries** through clearly defined roles with a specific mandate and strong leadership.

Without these reforms, Sri Lanka risks repeating the painful lessons of Easter Sunday and exposing its citizens to future preventable tragedies. A stronger, smarter, and more cohesive intelligence community is not a luxury; it is a national security imperative.

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