

Identity, Choices and Crisis: A Study of Muslim Political Leadership in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study attempts to understand the choices made by Muslim political leaders in general, and after independence in particular. Muslim leadership has been broadly classified into two categories based on their respective agendas. This paper looks critically at the choices made by Muslim leaders, as well as some state concessions that could have contributed to growing Islamic fundamentalism. It finally suggests some measures to the current problems of (North and East) Muslims: socio-economic concessions and local power-sharing.

Keywords

Choices, concessions, displacement, fundamentalism, power-sharing, violence, vote

Introduction

Opening Remarks with Theoretical Notes

Votes play a critical role in all democratic systems of government where the system allows politicians to formulate and execute policies. Two social scientists Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941) and Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), who conceived, developed and helped to understand the motives of political leaders in modern societies, say that politicians make moves to win power (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935). They rejected the concept of popular sovereignty and majority rule and, courageously, said that the beneficiaries of government in every system are the elite and not the masses as widely believed. Decisions are made by them even though they are only a minority in a community. Pareto sub-divided the elite into the ‘governing elite,’ such as leaders of the ruling party, and those who were less significant into the ‘non-governing elite’ (Finer, 1966: 248). The bottom line, as Robert Dahl maintained, is that ‘the key political, economic, and social decisions’ are made by ‘tiny minorities’ who hold and exercise public power (Dahl, 1964, quotes in Bachrach, 1967: 7) and below them are numerous classes of persons who never, in any real sense, participate in government but merely submit to it and who are the ruled class.

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Several socio-political factors both at the elite level and masses level may cause instability. Tensions and disunity at the elite level may encourage a section of elites to rebel against the system. They may then mobilize the people to overthrow the leadership at the elections or through other means. Politicians play all available cards be it ethnic, religious or otherwise to win or consolidate power. This leads to Hobbes's definition of power as a 'present means to some future apparent good' (cited in Parry, 1969: 33).

In a democracy political leaders often claim that they are running public offices or formulating policies in order to help the ordinary masses. Mosca challenges such popular claims (Parry, 1969: 31). These electoral manipulations largely influence the behavior of the voters who will choose their leaders from those acceptable to the elite. As Sidney Hook observed, 'political power never rests upon the consent of the majority . . . all political rule is a process by which a minority gratifies its own interests . . . the masses who have fought, bled, and starved are made the goat' (Hook, 1965: 136).

If democracy allows elite rule as the elite theorists maintain, what then is the role of the voters? Schumpeter replies that the role of the people is simply to 'produce a government' (Schumpeter, 1943: 269). According to this line of thinking, in a democracy the participation of the masses do not go beyond the limit of voting. One may argue as Rousseau maintained in *Social Contract* (1954) that the system should permit the masses to vigorously participate in the system. However, practically, most political systems are not friendly to the masses. This led the elite theorists to be skeptical about the masses' participation and democracy.

Political leaders can liberate the masses from the shadow of isolation and transform them as a solid unified group: the socialist revolution by Lenin in Russia in 1917, the social revolution by SWRD Bandarnaike in Sri Lanka in 1956, the Islamic revolution by Ayathullah Khomeini in Iran in 1979, and the Orange Revolution by Viktor Yushenko in Ukraine in 2004, and the recent Arab Spring (2011-) that progressively helped overthrow the rulers from Tunisia to Egypt in the Middle East all confirm how the elite mobilize masses for political change. Needless to say, the elite enjoyed the fruits of peoples' revolutions; namely, political power. To win power, leaders in democratic societies, in Anthony Downs' words, '*formulate policies in order to win elections*' (Downs, 1957: 28, emphasis added). Therefore elitist theorists believed that the old definition of 'government by the people' should be given a new meaning to reflect reality.

There cannot be democracy without regular, free, and fair electoral competition between different political parties (Diamond and Morlino, 2004: 24). Thus elections necessitate political leaders developing a productive relationship with the voters to win elections. In divided societies, the more the parties or politicians sell attractive emotional policies and pledges, the more are their chances of getting votes. Sri Lanka is no exception to this rule. This paper attempts to look at the choices of Muslim political leaders in Sri Lanka who represent the third but important group among the people of the country. In Sri Lanka, all major political parties regularly avail of ethnic issues to win public support. Since there is a political space for such choices, it is becoming increasingly hard for political leaders to employ non-ethnic cards to gain political power. This study attempts to focus on the Muslim political leaders of Sri Lanka who employ the similar strategies in their quest for power.

General Remarks on the Muslims of Sri Lanka: Identity and Political Leadership

Muslims in Sri Lanka constitute approximately 8% of the country's population (Department of Census and Statistics, 1981). They belong to three different ethno-social backgrounds: the Sri Lanka Moors, the Indian Moors and the Malays. The others include the Memons and the Bohras. The term Moors, used by the Portuguese in the 16th century, referred to the Arab Muslims and

descendants. The term was applied to identify the religion and had no role in identifying their origin (Vasundra Mohan, 1987: 9). They were scattered along the coastal areas but some of them moved into the interior, perhaps to avoid persecution by the Portuguese and the Dutch who once ruled the maritime provinces. Though the majority of Muslims (62%) live outside of the north and east of Sri Lanka (see Table 1) where the Sinhalese predominantly live, 38% of the Muslim population live in the Tamil-dominated north and east. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE), formed in 1972 as a direct response to state violence and institutional discrimination against the Tamils and militarily defeated in May 2009, expelled the Muslims of the north from the region in October 1990. The forcible expulsion of the entire Muslim community, numbering an estimated 60,000,¹ from the Districts of Jaffna, Mannar and Mullaitivu, virtually emptied the Tamil-dominated northern province of its Muslim population.

The eastern province – once predominantly Tamil speaking – is today a volatile mix of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim populations, primarily the result of systematic colonization policies of successive governments since independence. That has made it into a veritable ethnic tinderbox. More than 31% of the country's Muslims live here, making them a distinct opposition group in the Tamil Tigers' homeland campaign. That was one of the primary reasons why the Tamil Tigers have been stubbornly opposed to Muslim participation in the peace talks.² The east, in fact, remains the last Muslim bastion after the 1990s, ever since the Tamil Tigers purged the country's northern province of its Muslim population (Hoole, 2001).

What makes Muslims of Sri Lanka unique from their (Indian) Tamilnadu Muslim counterparts is Sri Lanka Muslims' strong desire to strictly identify themselves as a distinct ethnic group based on their religious and cultural identity (Imtiyaz and Hoole, 2011). Tamilnadu Muslims describe themselves as ethnic Tamils who follow Islam. The issue of the ethnic identity of the Muslims in Sri Lanka cropped up during the period of Ponnambalam Ramanathan.³ He argued that Muslims are ethnically Tamils who had been converted to the Islamic faith (Ramanathan, 1888). This led to the historic Ramanathan–Azeez debate in which the latter argued that the Moors of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known then) were of Arab origin and therefore racially distinct from the Tamils who claimed to originate from South India (Azeez, 1907).

The British Governor AH Gordon accepted the Muslim demand for Muslim representation in the expanded legislative council, despite opposition by Ramanathan, and appointed MC Abdul Rahuman to represent Muslims at the council in 1889 (Vasundra Mohan, 1987: 22). The second

Table 1. Provincial distribution of Muslim population 1911, 1971, 1981 and 2001

Province	1911	1971	1981	2001
Western	50,292	237,587	297,587	378,173
Central	29,997	135,903	167,690	225,453
Northern	13,354	44,429	54,828	—
Southern	20,308	45,149	52,545	63,230
Eastern	69,912	250,801	317,177	245,089*
North western	25,506	88,429	114,459	229,642
North central	9,350	38,877	61,422	88,775
Uva	5,357	28,397	34,509	48,502
Sabragamuva	10,825	40,369	51,989	72,570
Total	233901	909941	1152206	13514334

*Only Ampara district. Source: Tabulated from report of the Delimitation Commission (1976: 371); Samaraweera (1978: 468); Department of Census and Statistics (1981, 2001).

phase of Muslim identity formation occurred in the beginning of 1915 as a consequence of the Sinhala-Muslim violence (Rutnam, 1971; Tambiah, 1990). The rise of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism led by Anagarika Dharmapala, who bred hatred towards Muslims – especially the traders, naming them as enemies of the Sinhalese by religion, race and language (Bartholomeusz, 1999) – was the key source of tensions between the Sinhalese and the Muslims. Commercial rivalry between the Muslims and the Sinhalese became more stubborn as coast Moors ‘were tenacious in asserting their trading interests more vociferously than the indigenous Muslims’ (de Silva, 1973: 390–391). The British took stern measures to curb the violence against the Muslims in 1915.

Muslims, regardless of regional differences, united and considered the attack on the coast Muslims as violence against the entire Muslim community. However, P Ramanathan, a leading Tamil elite who had a social and political base in the Tamil-dominated Jaffna, successfully challenged the British colonial administration and helped achieve the release of the Sinhalese rioters who had been arrested. The Muslims took this (Tamil support for the Sinhala nationalists) as an act of revenge against their community.

As soon as the Muslim elite gained state legitimacy for a Muslim identity, they negotiated with the British authorities to introduce laws to regulate Muslim marriages through the Mohammedan Marriage Registration Ordinance (No. 8 of 1886 and No. 2 1888, quoted from Imtiyaz and Hoole, 2011). Interestingly, Ramanathan helped Muslims in 1890s in their attempt to win exclusive law for Muslims pertaining to marriages (Vythilingam, 1971: 261–266). This rather disproves the prevailing Muslim view that Ramanathan had ‘inherent dislike’ of Muslims during that era (Personal correspondence, Dr Sachi Sri Kantha, 24 October 2006).

Ironically Muslim political leaders in the mid-1930s and 40s turned around and opted to collaborate with the Sinhala political establishment. One Tamil critique points out that, in 1940s, ‘the Muslim leaders deviated from the 1915 thinking and joined hand with DS Senanayake for plums of office and patronage’ (Personal correspondence, Dr Sachi Sri Kantha, 24 October 2006). This was perhaps because the Muslim elite realized that their former adversaries (Sinhalese) would be in the driving seat in the post-independence country’s polity.

To carry their identity to the next stage, both the Muslim political elite and religious movements such the Jammathi Islami and Tabligh Jamaat played very positive roles in uniting Muslims under an Islamic umbrella to give political weight to a largely constructed identity. However, the Tamil leaders, particularly the Tamil militants, rejected the separate identity of the Muslims and called them Islamiyath Thamizhar or Islamic Tamils. Ameer Ali maintains that such a Tamil reflection is in line with the Ramanathan theory recovered ‘from the graveyard of 19th century history’ (Ali, 2002). However, continuous Tamil indifference towards the Muslims was one of the reasons why sections of the Muslim political leadership opposed the Tamil nationalist struggle for political autonomy and still uphold the Muslim identity based on the Islamic faith (interview with Sri Lankan Muslims who hail from eastern Sri Lanka, 21 September 2006).

Since Muslims are scattered all over the island, the Muslim elite found it difficult until the middle of the 1980s to form an ethno-religious political party (Ali, 1984). In fact, Muslim constituencies in southern Sri Lanka⁴ demanded neither a separate party for the Muslims nor did they have nationalist oriented political demands. All they wanted was smooth co-existence with the Sinhalese to stabilize their commercial interests. This explains their traditional support to the United National Party (UNP), which believes that economic miracles can be wrought through liberalization.

Yet Muslims, for their political support to the Sinhalese-dominated major parties, however, gained some socio-economic as well as political concessions from successive ruling parties (Ali, 1984). In return for Muslim support, Sinhala-dominated political parties offered concessions such as the establishment of segregated schools only for Muslims in the areas where a visible

Muslim presence had become a salient, training college for Muslims who would like to become teachers to teach Islam, and Arabic. However, it is no secret that through such generousities the Sinhalese elite advanced their own interests such as: (1) winning Arab economic and military support; and (2) keeping the Muslims on their side against the Tamil struggle. According to Ameer Ali, the Arab countries in 1980 contributed a total of Rs.317 million to the country's foreign assistance receipts that year (Ali, 2002). The Middle East countries are leading importers of Sri Lankan tea in terms of both volume and value. Ali also argues that 'between 1978 and 1980 nearly 75,000 Sri Lankans migrated in search of employment abroad, and of these the majority went to the Middle East' (Ali, 2002).

Further, Sri Lanka has been gaining military support from some Muslim countries, particularly Pakistan. When India turned down President Rajapakse's request in 2006 for specific arms supply, Pakistan, ever looking for opportunities to embarrass or create trouble for India, immediately saw an opening and rushed US\$150 million worth of weapons that included a fleet of battle tanks with heavy guns and an air defense system. For almost five years Pakistan has been supplying weapons and equipment suited for counter-insurgency operations against the Tamil rebels in the north-east. Some of the deadly Pakistani cargo arrives as 'gifts'. Moreover, defense analysts who had affiliations with Indian security intelligence units have been alleging that 'Pakistan Air Force personnel are teaching Lankan pilots how to use bunker busting bombs to kill' the Tamil Tiger leader Mr V Prabhakaran (Balachandran, 2006). However, the Pakistan High Commission in Sri Lanka has denied such cooperation against the Tamil Tigers (Balachandran, 2006). Unavoidably, both India and Tamils are concerned about the growing military ties between the armies of Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Besides economic and military factors, political reasons also explain why successive governments in Colombo are so accommodative towards the Muslim community. They were well aware of the negative consequences of Muslims joining the Tamil struggle against the Sri Lanka state. Thus to wean away Muslim support to the Tamil struggle and to get Muslim votes at subsequent elections, demands of the Muslim political elites of that time were rarely turned down.

Muslim Political Establishment

Muslim Political Leaders and their Choices

Sri Lanka Muslims *generally* produce politicians who have strong upper middle or higher class backgrounds. Consequently they seek membership and roles in the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to purportedly to serve their community but in fact advance their personal aspirations. Following the declaration of Sinhala as the official language in 1956, the Muslims of the north and the east empathized with the Tamils who claimed this was discriminatory. Among the founder members of the then Federal Party of Sri Lanka were many Muslim leaders from the east. In fact, initially, there were at least two Muslim members elected to the parliament from the east who belonged to the Federal Party which ostensibly proclaimed itself a party of the Tamil-speaking people against a party of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. With the rise of Tamil militancy in the 1980s, some Muslim youth from the north and east joined the Tamil militant movements. However, subsequent events turned out to be detrimental to the amity between the Tamils and Muslims of the north and the east. There appeared visible signs of attempts by Tamils to forcefully assimilate the Muslims into the wider Tamil community (see Hussain, 2001). This process was exacerbated after the expulsion of the Muslims from the north by the LTTE in October 1990 (Manivannan, 2002). These events promoted Muslims to increasingly seek to align themselves with the Sinhalese majority. The political

preferences of Muslim elites⁵ concerning their business and other interests led Muslims to build and consolidate their own identity based more on religion than on language. This annoyed the Tamil political leaders (Tamil Nation, 1992). Consequently relations between the linguistically united Tamils and Muslims began to turn sour. Eventually Muslim religio-nationalism emerged in the eastern province under the charismatic leadership of the late MHM Ashraff who founded the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1985 (Hussain, 2001). The SLMC claimed that the security and peace of Sri Lanka Muslims, particularly of the north-east Muslims, were at risk, and thus Muslims should be given their due place and rights in the Sri Lankan polity (Ameerdeen, 2006a). The emergence of the SLMC centered in the eastern province piercingly challenged and changed the strategies of the Colombo-based Muslim political elite who, until then, were in the driving seat of Muslim political establishments.

Muslim Political Elite of the South and their Choices

Al Haj Sir Mohamed Macan Markar, one of the few Muslim political leaders of the pre-independence era, indicated the direction of Muslim politics of that time when he said ‘. . . the minorities (I am not speaking for Jaffna or Batticaloa) do not want equal representation with the Sinhalese. But what we want is adequate representation and good government. *I prefer this country to be ruled by the Sinhalese . . .*’ (quoted in Vasundra Mohan, 1987: 25, emphasis added).

The political ambition of the Muslim political class became more obvious when it opposed the All Ceylon Tamil Congress’s (ACTC) famous political demand popularly known as the ‘fifty-fifty’ demand. The ACTC’s demand aimed to allocate 50% of seats to the majority Sinhalese, while reserving the rest for the minorities. Muslim political leaders initially backed the ACTC’s proposal. However, the Muslim League, a political organization of Muslims, withdrew their support. The following are some of the reasons for doing so: (1) Tamils wanted to share the full 50% of the slots; (2) non-cooperation from the All-Ceylon Moor’s Association towards the Muslim League; and (3) a Sinhalese opposition to the fifty-fifty demand.

Muslim opposition to the fifty-fifty demand eventually led Muslim political leaders to formulate their own demands to the British-appointed Soulbury Commission appointed to propose further constitutional reform towards an independent government.⁶ This move of the Muslim elite had a dual purpose. Their contention was that supporting the fifty-fifty proposals of the Tamil Congress would be tantamount to accepting Ramanathan’s hypothesis that they were the descendants of Tamils who embraced Islam, and it would go against their own identity as a religious ethnic group. By not supporting this move and taking a pro-Sinhalese stance they believed that they would safeguard their commercial and ethno-religious interests. Muslim leaders who hailed from the western and central provinces believed that such an alliance with the Sinhalese political class would benefit the Muslims as the Sinhalese political class would hold the key to the island’s post-colonial politics and commercial interests.

Sir Razik Fareed vehemently condemned attempts to categorize the Muslims as a part of the wider Tamil community. He declared that such efforts would be considered ‘political genocide of my race, the Moor community, by another race, the Tamil community.’ He emphasized that Muslims were not Tamils but they were the ‘proud progeny of a heroic race – The Arabs.’ He also rejected Ramanathan’s thesis on Muslim ethnicity and declared that Muslims ‘will fight to our last cent, the last drop of our blood and our last breath to nail, to counter this falsehood’ (quoted in Vasundra Mohan, 1987: 28–30). Later the Muslim politicians’ cooperation with the Sinhalese leaders took a new shape when Sir Razik Fareed decided to support JR Jayewardene’s official language motion on his agreeing to the conditions stipulated by him.

In brief, the close links the Muslims had with the Sinhalese in trade and business, and the Muslim strategy to win political and social benefits by cooperating with the Sinhalese, as well as the Muslims' fear of the Tamils sidelining them, prompted the Muslim elite to lean towards Sinhalese political establishments. This trend continued since independence in 1948. However, the Muslim political leadership fragmented as the Sri Lanka polity produced two major predominantly Sinhalese parties, the SLFP and the UNP. These two parties attempted to woo minorities for electoral gains. Initially the Muslim elite did not show enthusiasm in forming a separate party for the Muslims, as they thought that the Muslims could win their share in the island's polity by cooperating either with the SLFP or with the UNP. This was contrary to the position of the Tamils who did not have any trust in the Sinhalese political class.

To win Muslim rights and safeguard their commercial interests, Muslim leaders demanded increased representation in parliament. The Delimitation Commissions of 1947, 1959 and 1974, according to Urmila Phadnis 'ensured reasonable chances of proportionate representation to the Muslims by creating electorates in such a way as to grant them a seat even when it was not justified in terms of population' (Phadnis, 1979: 29). The reform of the electoral districts to increase national political representation helped the Muslim political leadership to further expand Muslim representation in parliament. Electoral reforms also encouraged Muslims to keep their trust in democratic alternatives and to develop an interest in electoral politics.

The very first solid collaboration between the Muslim elite in the south and the Sinhalese materialized in 1956 when the Sinhalese nationalists, led by SWRD Bandaranaike, broke ranks with the UNP and announced that the official language would be Sinhala-Only,⁷ a policy considered as anti-Tamil by Tamil moderate leaders.⁸ The SLFP, led by Bandaranaike, formed the Mahajan Eksath Peramuna (MEP), an electoral alliance comprising mostly Sinhala nationalists, and successfully extended its leadership over the Sinhalese urban entrepreneurs, the rising rural petty-bourgeoisie of the south, Sinhalese school teachers, village physicians, notaries, and village monks. The UNP briefly opposed the Sinhala-only promises of the SLFP but later supported their language policy in place of its policy of parity of status for Sinhala and Tamil. The UNP Muslim politicians left the party and joined the SLFP-led ruling Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP). It is said that Muslim politicians were not happy with the UNP because the latter did not offer sufficient cabinet portfolios to the Muslim members of the UNP government. Thus they decided to support the MEP which advocated pro-socialist and nationalist policies. Also, later four Muslim members of parliament (two from the Federal Party, one from the UNP and an independent candidate) switched sides and joined the MEP, thus increasing the strength of the Muslim members of parliament in the MEP from one to five (Weerawardena, 1960).

The Muslim decision to cross the floor, however, raised some questions about the political credibility of the Muslim leaders, particularly among the Tamil minority. Their strong justification was that cooperation of the Muslims with the ruling party in Colombo would bring benefit to the community. Muslim politicians were not the only ones who performed such crossovers. A leading Tamil parliamentarian, GG Ponnambalam, the architect of the fifty-fifty demand, joined ranks with the UNP government in 1948⁹ and supported the Citizenship Act No. 18 of 1948, which deprived voting and civil rights to thousands of Indian Tamils (Wilson, 1988). That move splintered the Tamil leaders as well.

In 1956, as pointed out earlier, Muslim politicians of the south and front organizations decided to support the Sinhala-only policy of the SLFP. The All Ceylon Moors' Association and the All Ceylon Muslim League said that they would support the Sinhala-only policy because 'most of the "politically active" Muslims lived in the Sinhalese speaking areas' (Wilson, 1988: 48). It seems

that they totally ignored the fact that Tamil was the native language of the majority of Muslims. Muslims thought that their support to the MEP government was crucial to the survival of the government, and demanded concessions in exchange of their support for the bill to expand their separate identity beyond linguistic affiliation. The MEP government granted their demands.

The government's enthusiasm to accommodate Muslim demands encouraged the Muslim elite to continue their support to the Sinhalese. However, the southern-centered Muslim leaderships failed to pay enough attention on the plight of the north-east Muslims with whom they hardly had any consultation. Such a gap raised doubts over the legitimacy of the Muslim leadership.

However, the cooperation of the Muslim elite with the Sinhalese ruling class won important ministerial portfolios for Muslims in successive governments. The Muslim masses were not seriously concerned with politics so long as their freedom to practice their religion, which was and is the foundation of their ethnic identity, and enjoy social and economic development was not affected. By appeasing the Muslims and keeping them satisfied, the government stood 'to gain politically, and the country economically' (Ali, 1984: 299). In fact, while denying the Tamil moderates the demand for political autonomy and comfortably accommodating the Muslims on the governing boards, the Sinhalese helped the Muslim elite in their quest for a separate identity. Such state strategies were being considered by the Tamil leaders as the basis of Tamil-Muslim discord in the middle of 1980 (Tamil Nation, 1992). Tamil violence against the Muslims in the eastern province and vice-versa destabilized the region and lives of both Muslims and Tamils (Personal correspondence, Mr PK Balachandran, Colombo-based *Hindustan Times* journalist, 16 October 2006).

However, the Muslim elite, whose major concern was their identity and commercial interests, defended their choices. Yet ironically the Muslim elite totally failed to comprehend the consequences of such deep cordiality with the Sinhalese elite to the lives of the north-east Muslims. In 1985 three Muslim worshippers at a mosque in Mannar were said to have been gunned down by Tamil militants. The tension that followed ruined Tamil-Muslim cordiality. The UNP, which was in power at that time, exploited this incident to create a permanent rift between the LTTE and the Muslims (Ali, 1986).

In 1990, the Tamil Tigers unleashed some horrendous violence on Muslims of Polonnaruwa, Kattankudy and Eravur in which 'tens and hundreds of Muslim men, women and children were massacred in their homes, fields, markets, and mosques' (Ali, 1986: 150). Such Muslim vulnerability at the hands of Tamil militant nationalists encouraged many eastern Muslims to endorse the political appeals of the SLMC¹⁰ its leader Ashraff had a powerful presence and firmly believed that Muslim survival depended on not provoking the Sinhalese but discreetly cooperating with them.

Rise of Eastern Muslim National Leadership and their choices

The creation of the SLMC in 1985 was a significant event in the development of Muslim politics. The party clearly stressed the point that 'it was a party pledged to follow the Quran and the Sunnah' (quoted in Ameerdeen, 2006a: 132) and seek solutions to Sri Lanka's social, political and ethnic crisis based on the tenets of Islam, and preserve and promote Islamic laws (Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, 1998). Such emotional religious appeals (with pure anti-Tamil slogans) attracted the economically deprived and politically marginalized north-east Muslims.

The SLMC identified itself as a voice of the Muslims, particularly the Muslims of the north and east, and attempted to cohabit with the Sinhalese polity and its leading political parties such as the

SLFP and the UNP, a kind of tactic successfully employed by its south-centered predecessors. The SLMC's growth and tactics made the LTTE uneasy. To contain the activities of the SLMC, the Tamil Tigers outlawed the SLMC and listed Mr Ashraff in its hit list (Ameerdeen, 2006b). This incredibly annoyed the SLMC. Mr Ashraff retorted with equal vehemence and vowed to declare *jihad against* the LTTE if it continued to target him and harass his supporters (quoted in Ameerdeen, 2006b). With this religio-ethnic emotional baggage the SLMC participated, for the first time, in provincial council elections in December 1988, even though the SLMC was not in favor of the Indo-Lanka Accord and objected to the establishment of provincial councils. At the elections the SLMC obtained 168, 038 votes of the north-east Muslims, and secured 29 seats (Department of Census and Statistics, 2001; Dissanayake, 1986: 86). Ashraff managed to win a reasonable percentage of the north-east Muslim votes (see de Silva, 1998), which was still a remarkable political achievement.

Subsequently, as stated earlier, thousands of Muslims were expelled forcefully from Jaffna in October 1990; 300 eastern Muslims were killed at prayer time inside their mosque in 1991 and Muslim wealth was confiscated in the Jaffna, Batticaloa, and Amparai districts of the north-eastern Province (Imtiyaz, 2005). Such incidents further generated Muslim ethno-religious nationalism and aided the SLMC to convert Muslim grievances to electoral gains. The general election victories of 1994, 2000, and 2004 and the provincial council elections in 1993 proved that the SLMC's election campaigns employing ethno-religious Muslim nationalism coupled with anti-Tamil/Tamil Tigerism rhetoric over and over again engendered the support of the Muslims (for details see www.srilankanelections.com).

With the political capital the SLMC earned from the Muslim masses, it took moves to cooperate with the southern Sinhalese polity to secure jobs and other non-territorial concessions for Muslims. Ashraff effectively negotiated and won key portfolios from the Sinhala ruling parties for the SLMC. He and his party colleagues filled key ministerial posts such as the Ministry of Ports and Shipping and Eastern Development as well as other significant positions in government institutions and diplomatic appointments. However, the SLMC's vigorous journey met severe difficulties when Mr Ashraff died due to an air accident (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2000). The new leadership, led by Mr Rauf Hakeem, decided to follow in the footsteps of the late Mr Ashraff. But instability, particularly in the east, continued. This seems to have put some pressure on the SLMC leadership. The SLMC found that its choices in pursuit of political gains would trigger more crises in the north-east, and thus it decided to freeze some of its radical rhetoric towards Tamil nationalism, engineered by the LTTE. Consequently, a high level meeting took place between the SLMC delegation led by Mr Rauf Hakeem and the LTTE led by Mr V Pirabakaran on 13 April 2002 (TamilNet, 2002) and reached a 'Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).' Yet nothing much seriously improved in the landscape of Tamil-Muslim relations whether at the masses or elite level.

With the death of Mr Ashraff factions emerged within the SLMC ranks and weakened its bargaining power. The Muslim political elite's inability to make the right choices and policies to win Muslim interests largely frustrated the eastern Muslims. The large sections of Muslim undergraduates believed that the SLMC was just formulating policies to win public offices for themselves (interviews with Muslim undergraduates from Colombo and South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, July 2006). Actually Muslim politicians, in MLA Cader's words, were 'not thinking, organizing, mobilizing people nor gathering intelligence. They were oblivious to what was going on in the north-east while the people were demanding attention . . . the party was preoccupied with the leadership problem' (Cader, 2003).

Choice of Muslim Leaders During the Ceasefire and Thereafter

The Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) of 2002 was a disappointment to many Muslims (Asia Report, 2007: 1). They feared that any agreement which gave the LTTE exclusive control of the north and east would be detrimental to their own interests. Despite a memorandum of understanding having been signed by Rauf Hakeem and Pirabakaran, Muslims continued to be the target of violent attacks. Dozens have been killed and thousands displaced. The tsunami of December 2004 affected as many Muslims of the east as the Tamils. Yet when the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) was set up the Muslims leaders of the east were ignored. Muslims of the east complained that they were given a place only in the symbolic apex body but the implementation in the east was left completely in the hands of the LTTE. This was an affront to the Muslim leaders (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2007). Even though some of them were part of the government at that time, they were not able to apply the leverage on the then ruling party the SLFP.

Soon after President Rajapakse came to power in November 2005 the CFA was abrogated. At the commencement of the full-scale war Mutur, a prominent Muslim town in the east, came under attack by the LTTE. In the battle that ensued both the LTTE and Sri Lanka Army bombarded Mutur without any consideration for the large number of Muslim civilians living in that area (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2007). The Muslim leaders were impotent witnesses to the devastation that followed and the displacement of the Muslims of Mutur and the deaths of many. The choice the leaders had was to cry foul at Mahinda Rajapakse and lose all the benefits they enjoyed in their respective positions or speak out loudly for the cause of the Mutur Muslims. They chose the former. Moreover, The Muslim leaders of the east and those of the south found themselves completely ignored in matters relating to the military offensives against the Tamils.

At the provincial council elections that took place subsequently in the east in 2008, Hisbullah, a prominent Muslim leader who should have been made Chief Minister, had to give in to the pressure of President Rajapakse and let Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, an ex-militant, to be appointed to that post. This again is indicative of the government stance towards the Muslims of the east.

Muslim political leaders of the north and the east, though divided on political and personal grounds, wanted to be cordial with either of the Sinhala political parties. However, they came into conflict with a new, pro-government Tamil paramilitary group, the Karuna Faction, who were alleged to have been behind the harassment of Muslim traders in the east while they were in the LTTE. Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the splintered SLMC, realized that he could not now wield power the way Ashraff did during the heyday of the SLMC. Consequently frustration among Muslim youth in the east became more and more visible. In some areas Muslim armed groups cropped up. But they were small and not a major security threat (Asia Report, 2007). Yet fears of armed Islamist movements emerging became real. The choice the Muslim leaders faced then was to either expose them or pretend they were unaware of them. Small gangs have been engaged in semi-criminal activities and intra-religious disputes, especially in Kattankudy.

With the subsequent military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the minorities in general and the Muslims in particular found themselves more and more marginalized. The former army commander Sarath Fonseka is reported to have said: 'I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese. Other communities can live in this country with us, but they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things' (quoted in *The National Post*, 2008). In the absence of a rebuttal to this statement by the government the Muslim leaders aligned with the government had no choice but to 'grin and bear it.' Rauf Hakeem congratulated

the government on its success in defeating the LTTE (SLMC, 2009). Hakeem, who supported the war against the Tamils which, according to the UN the report of the three-member panel which was released in April, 'found credible allegations of serious violations committed by the government, including killing of civilians through widespread shelling and the denial of humanitarian assistance' (United Nations [UN], 2011). Hakeem, and for that matter the SLMC and Muslim politicians attached to the Sinhalese-dominated political parties, did not regret their open support of the war against the Tamils. Hakeem, however, before long realized that the time had come for Muslims to work for the overthrow of the regime led by President Mahinda Rajapakse, and joined the alliance brokered by Mangala Samaraweera and Ranil Wickremasinghe, the leader of the UNP, to fight the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2010 as one block (*Muslim Guardian*, 2009).

In November 2010 the SLMC decided to join the government. Several reasons explain the SLMC's move. One among them was to appease the members of the party who showed serious interest in joining the Rajapakshe regime (interview with high level party member [who wished to remain anonymous], 13 June 2011). Their decision to join the government, according to the SLMC,¹¹ 'was prompted by the need of the hour to participate in national development programs' (Wedaarachchi and Krishnaswamy, 2011). Additionally the SLMC supported the 18th amendment to the constitution. That's the choice of Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the key Muslim party of the day.

Critique suggests that 18th amendment to the constitution 'has removed restrictions on the term limits of the president and has also strengthened his hands by replacing the constitutional council by a parliamentary council consisting of five members.' The same view points that the 'amendment has virtually made the incumbent president the equivalent of a monarch or more precisely an all powerful sovereign head of state' (Perera, 2010). Politicians often rationalize all of their moves, but it is their constituencies, or for that matter groups they claim to represent, who eventually have to confront the consequences of politicians' choices.

Conclusion

This study attempted to expose the social and political realities of the leaders of Sri Lanka Muslims who associate both with the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Though the Muslim leadership is primarily divided between the south and the north-east, both groups froze their differences when they sought a separate Muslim identity, disavowing P Ramanathan's thesis mentioned earlier in this paper. Yet the Muslim elites are resolutely loyal to the cause of an undivided Sri Lanka. Both the Colombo-based political leaders and the SLMC do not favor a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. They are well aware of the consequences of current political instability and violence both on the affairs of trade and their community. Under the circumstances, they support peace efforts to seek a political solution under an undivided Sri Lanka. However, Muslim political leaders do not share a common voice on the model of devolution that would be acceptable.

Nevertheless, the SLMC, while extending its loyalty to an undivided Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, 1988) recognizes the grievances of the Tamils vis-à-vis the Sri Lankan polity. Thus it supports regional autonomy for the Tamils, provided that Muslims are allowed to administer the regions where they are dominant in the north-east (Colombo Page, 2011) in order to prevent what they call Tamil hegemony in the region. With the euphoria that followed the defeat of the LTTE, the need to put forward a political solution to solve the vexed problems of the Tamils has receded to the back stage.

Growing Islamic fundamentalism, which was and is the by-product of the several socio-political reasons in the pockets of areas where Muslim presence is noticeable, needs to be monitored and contained for a better future.

In March 2012, the UN's Human Rights (UNHRC) Council backed an American led initiative which specifically calls on Sri Lankan authorities to implement the recommendations contained in the report written by the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), which President Mahinda Rajapaksa set up to investigate the final stages of the civil war (Promoting Reconciliation and Accountability in Sri Lanka, Sangam, March 22, 2012). The resolution also called on Sri Lanka's government "to account for the massive toll of civilian fatalities from the end of its long and brutal civil war in 2009 (Sri Lanka and the UN, Economist, March 23, 2012)." Despite the fact that the government of Sri Lanka employed aggressive campaign to win member states to oppose the resolution, the council's 47 members voted, by 24 to 15, Eight of the member-countries abstained. Among the 15 who voted in favour of the government of Sri Lanka, six of them were Muslim majority countries. They are, Indonesia, Kuwait, Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia. Sri Lanka thanked the Muslim majority countries for voting in Sri Lanka's favor at the UN summit for human rights (Sri Lanka thanks Kingdom for UN vote, Arabnews, March 23, 2012).

Muslim political parties, including the SLMC and religious groups such as Sri Lanka Jama'ath-e-Islami and an Islamist group, which has strong backing of Colombo-based Muslim politicians attached to ruling political alliance, led by President Rajapakshe, enthusiastically opposed the Western countries initiated and backed the resolution on Sri Lanka (Demonstration against the Jews Youtube, March 15, 2012) at the UNHRC. These religious groups and Muslim politicians, who constructed ethnic identity for Moors based on Islamic faith, perceived the resolution as conspiracy of the west "to impose their interests and politics in Sri Lanka, and thus called Muslims of Sri Lanka to support the regime (author's interview, March 24, 2012)" which scored a relatively comprehensive win in war against the Tamil Tigers, in which the United Nation panel "found credible allegations of serious violations committed by the Government, including killing of civilians through widespread shelling and the denial of humanitarian assistance (The Report of the secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, March 2011)."

It seems that the current Congress Party-led Indian government is seriously concern about the growth of Islamic Muslim religious organizations which advocate anti-West and anti-India slogans and their recent active participation against the West back resolution, but India supported resolution on Sri Lanka. According to the local sources (Author's interview with participants of the demonstration on March 19 and 21, 2012), the Colombo based Islamic organization, which is ardently guided by local Muslim politicians has been very active in persuading Muslim students who pursue their studies in local religious schools "to take stand against American imperialism through ideological debates and armed conflicts." India believes that this organization played a key role in getting US allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar to vote in favor of Sri Lanka when the resolution was taken up for a vote and that they had also prevailed upon Malaysia to abstain from voting as a result," India is now keeping a close watch on the activities of the organization. (India keeps a close watch on actions of Wahibi organization, Lanka Newsweb, March 29, 2012)."

Islamic fundamentalism in Sri Lanka also can be read as a by-product of state's cultural and socio-economic concessions in the 70s and 80s to the Muslim elites to win Muslim support. Establishment of schools for Muslim women, appointing teachers to teach Islam without researching the background of schools of thought could be cited as few key reasons for the growing appetite for Islamic fundamentalism, which advances a more exclusive form of world view and Islam.

Needless to say, the state's cultural concessions delighted Muslims, but some cultural concessions offered in the past could have provided a solid platform for the recent growth of Islamic exclusivism. It is politically wrong to veil the trend. And denial from the Muslim political establishment about the existence of (Islamic fundamentalist) trends may reduce the Muslim democratic voices as mere voices that are only aspiring to power.

There are several political ways to win over the trust of minorities in plural societies. One among them is to offer concessions to minorities. Such concessions might not jeopardize social stability and the very nature of pluralist character when concessions are purely socio-economic rather than religio-cultural concessions. Muslim political establishment needs to understand the reality and the basic expectations of Muslims. Solutions to the problems of the Muslims, particularly the special politico-socio problems of the north and east, require special attentions and solutions. Muslim politicians (both the south and north-east based) are now with the ruling party and they are actively supporting the regime. Hence it is high time for them to seek solutions for socio-economic problems of the Muslims of Sri Lanka with state cooperation and help. Special efforts need to be grounded to recruit qualified teachers to fill the vacancy on what is known as Muslim schools, redesign the syllabus for Islam and Arabic subjects with the thoughts of modernity, adopt special programs to encourage Muslims to seek education and remove the current socio-economic obstacles for Muslims to gain both traditional and non-traditional education. Besides, there should be mechanisms to monitor the activities of Islamic organizations.

The state and ruling party need not play Islamic religious cards to keep Muslims happy. The ruling party and Sinhalese politicians need to address both socio-economic problems, as pointed out earlier, and special problems of Muslims such as the land problems of eastern Muslims and resettlements of the displaced northern Muslims (Imtiyaz, 2009; Imtiyaz and Iqbal, 2011). Also Muslim fears with respect to devolution to the Tamil nation need to be addressed by a proper political power sharing mechanism. In other words, the state as well as the Muslim political establishment needs to embrace aggressive measures by directly addressing the major underlying causes that contribute to the origin and growth of such a trend in the island of Sri Lanka.

Muslim political leaders in Sri Lanka are no exception to Downs' theory that political leaders make choices or 'formulate policies in order to win elections' (Downs, 1957: 28). President Rajapakse, who was reelected for the second term with the help of the majority of the Sinhalese votes (60%) in January 2010, too, is no exception to this rule (*The Economist*, 2010). However, such policies and choices often trigger both good and bad outcomes. There were positive results due to the choice of Muslim leaders' to cooperate with the Sinhalese elite, though successive governments had their own agendas behind providing such benefits. On the negative side is the fact that the expansion of Muslim 'cooperation' with the Sinhalese ruling elite became the basic for 'the intolerance of the Muslims in the ranks of the Tamils of the North and East' (Personal correspondence with Mr PK Balachandran, Sri Lankan correspondent to the *Hindustan Times*). This eventually resulted in pogroms such as killings of Muslims in the Tamil-dominated north-east, the expulsion of Muslims from the North in 1990 and Tamil violence against the Muslims in general (Imtiyaz, 2009). On the contrary, Muslim politicians believe that their choices are 'logically' right, and the Muslims have been reaping the fruits of their choices.¹²

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Notes

1. According to a report published by the Department of Census and Statistics, *Census on Population and Housing*, Colombo, 1981, the entire Muslim population of the northern province in 1981 (Jaffna District-14, 169, Mannar District-30, 079, Vavuniya District-6, 764, and Mullativu District-3,816) was 54,828. If the number of '100,000 Muslims' has to be believed, as the Tamil opinion points, 'one of the two demographic miracles should have happened in Jaffna between 1980 and 1990. First, there should have been a large scale immigration of Muslim population into Jaffna region between 1980 and 1990. Second, an unprecedented birth of Muslim babies should have occurred for 10 years due to some kind of divine blessing' (Tamil Nation, 2005). Any reasonably thinking Sri Lankans including Muslims are aware that neither of the two miracles happened. Therefore, it is misleading to put the expelled northern Muslim number as high as 100, 000.
2. Muslim politicians are demanding the government to offer separate seats in any peace talks it engages in with the Tamil Tigers. However, the government did not show greater interest in accommodating separate seats for the Muslims fearing such inclusion might disturb the prospect of peace talks with the Tamil Tigers who have deep reservations about Muslim participation as separate group.
3. Ponnambalam Ramanathan was the 'educated Ceylonese' member in the legislative council and served as representative of the Tamil-speaking community representing both Tamils and Muslims in the legislative council (1879–1891).
4. The Muslims of the north-east largely depend on agriculture and fisheries for their livelihood, whereas the rest of the 62% living in the south are primarily traders and businessmen. The southern Muslims are also educationally and economically more advanced than those of the north-east.
5. Muslim political leaders in Sri Lanka hail from upper and middle families, and are deeply interested in trade activities. Also, some of them are well educated and have been enjoying high privileges both at the national and community levels.
6. Muslim leaders demanded social, economic and political concessions including adequate representation in the state council from the British colonial administration.
7. JR Jayewardene, former member of the state council and the president of Sri Lanka (1978–1988), was an original author of the Sinhala-only language policy. He proposed the language bill in the state council in 1944 to replace the English language as the official language of the island with Sinhala. However, the British colonial administration did not back the proposed bill, despite strong support from the Muslim leaders led by Sir Razik Fareed. It is in fact Bandaranaike who was a one of the pioneer politicians who had publicly affirmed that he did not see any harm at all in recognizing the Tamil language also as an official language while minister of local government in 1944.
8. English was an official language of the island throughout the British period. The American missionary society with the prior permission from the British established significant numbers of English medium schools in Tamil dominated northern Sri Lanka, particularly in Jaffna. Moreover, overall the Tamils had fewer schools while Jaffna Tamils had more English schools. When the government opened application for the state sector, without any severe competition (Jaffna) Tamils seized the majority of those positions. In fact, only the very wealthy Sinhalese were able to aspire to an education in English and succeed. Therefore, adoption of the 'Sinhala only' decision influenced the ethnic confrontation between the vernacular-educated majority Sinhalese and English-educated minority Tamils.
9. According to the nationalist Tamil source, 'when this act was passed Mr. Ponnambalam was in the opposition. Later when Tamil congress decided to give responsive cooperation to the UNP government it did so only after getting an undertaking from late Mr DS Senanayake that he would consult the then Indian Prime Minister late Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru and bring a bill in parliament to give citizenship rights to those who were deprived of their citizenship by the earlier Citizenship Act.' For details see Vinayagamoorthy, n.d.
10. Ashraff contested under the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) banner in the 1977 general elections. Mr Ashraff suggested that he would fight to secure Tamil Eelam in case Amirthalingam, the leader of the TULF, failed to do so.

11. The SLMC contested the last general election on the UNP ticket and eight members were elected from Batticaloa, Digamadulla and the Wannī. The party also secured two National List slots.
12. Leading SLMC strongman in Sammanthurai, the key region of Muslim dominated in Amparai. He likes to remain anonymous for political reasons.

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