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COVID-19: The Crossroads for Sinhala–Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka's ethnic civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers, and the government of Sri Lanka comprising the majority of the Sinhalese Buddhist community came to a bloody end in May 2009. Muslims, whose political and civil society elite had largely supported the Sri Lankan state and security forces, welcomed the end of the war and the defeat of the Tamil Tigers given the history of the community with the LTTE. The expectations by the Muslims (and other communities) that peace would return to the country, were quickly dashed as it appeared that a new extremist Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist movement targeting religious minorities especially the Muslims would emerge as the country grappled with post-war reconciliation. The rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric, hate speech, and incitement to violence against the community has pushed some Muslims to think that they have become the new focus for Sinhala-Buddhist extremists in the wake of the defeat of the Tamil Tigers. With suspicions of the complicity of the state apparatus in the anti-Muslim campaign, there are serious concerns around the role and place of minorities (non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist) in the future makeup of the country. While there is no concrete evidence on the state's support for such an action, it is clear that the reluctance of the state to bring to justice those responsible for hate speech and incitement to violence since 2009 raises some serious questions about impartiality. In addition, with the increase of detentions and scrutiny of the Muslim community's post-Easter Sunday attacks and the recent treatment of the Muslim community in the response to the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, including shutting down of key Muslim towns and the enforcement of forced cremations (which goes against Islamic teachings of dignified burials), there is much to ponder of an anti-Muslim strategy being mainstreamed and institutionalized by the state. This paper will seek to situate the present response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the state and its particular actions affecting the Muslim community amid a wider backdrop of a rise in anti-Muslim hatred and action. In order to understand this, the paper will seek to understand the reasoning behind why Muslims who supported the war against the Tamil Tigers, have now become the enemy for Sinhala-Buddhist extremists. It does this through primary and secondary data gathering including interviews conducted between July 2020 and February 2021. In so doing this paper will explore the development of Muslim political and religious identity by looking at a historical perspective. This paper makes

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the argument that a holistic approach needs to be developed to avoid a new conflict taking place in Sri Lanka and to avoid violent Islamist extremism taking hold.

Introduction

Since independence in 1948, successive administrations in Sri Lanka have a history of accommodating Sri Lanka's Muslim polity for a variety of reasons. Being the second-order minority, Sri Lanka Muslims' elite and politicians used leverages effectively to win concrete economic and cultural concessions, both for them and their community.

Successive Sri Lankan governments' concessions to Muslim elites and their community progressively pushed Muslim elites to lobby the Muslim-majority Arab countries to help Sri Lanka in its fight against the Tamil Tigers and provide employment opportunities for low-skilled Sri Lankans. It is no secret that through such associations and support, the Sinhalese elite advanced their own interests such as: (a) winning Arab economic and military support; and (b) keeping the Muslims on their side against the Tamil struggle (Saleem, 2016).

However, since 2009, the Muslim community has faced a crisis of identity after being targeted by the extreme Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces in terms of their belonging in the country. Thus, the relationship between the Muslim community and the majority of the Sinhalese community and the government has deteriorated. This new development since 2009 pushed the Muslim community into a corner in which elites and common Muslims found themselves vulnerable. Our communications suggest that Muslims were disappointed with the successive governments since 2009 because they think "Sinhala politicians have failed to protect them from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists" (Interview with Muslims from Sammanthurai, Eastern Province, over Zoom in January 2021).

Unlike Sri Lankan Tamils, Sri Lankan Muslims have not demanded regional autonomy or supported a politico-military movement that demanded external self-determination, and until the recent Easter Sunday attacks, had not engaged in violence against the state (Mohamed Saleem, 2019). Yet there are grievances and distrust from the majority community which must be understood especially in the light of an intention to make Sri Lanka the Sinhala-Buddhist state that these majority forces believe it should be.

It is important to note that politico-religious forces in any society do not operate in a vacuum. In any democracy, politicians either lead politico-religious forces to woo votes or indirectly support such forces for political gains. In both cases, if politico-religious forces would emerge from the numerical majority community, politicians from the majority may use those forces because, usually, politico-religious forces from the majority represent the grievances of the majority as in other contexts with minority groups (Imtiyaz and Ameerdeen, 2020). Though it can be argued as to the veracity of the grievances from the majority, it is clear that these politico-religious forces represent a threat that cannot be dismissed easily. In this light, this paper will discuss problems confronted by the minority Sri Lankan Muslim community from grievances from the majority Sinhala-Buddhist community in the wake of the end of the conflict in 2009.

Challenges in discussing Muslim identity

The Sri Lankan Muslim identity was and is a reactive politico-cultural identity that was constructed as a response to late colonial Sri Lankan politics. It was largely "constructed", evolved and transformed

in response to the Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalism that emerged as a result of anti-colonial movements originating from the late 19th century.

The separate Muslim identity narrative formation involves an analysis of how it has undergone a political transformation based on colonial political representations and as a result of the actions of successive Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan governments post-independence. This transformation was also helped in parallel by the development of an identity fundamentally based on Islamic belief and culture (International Crisis Group, 2007b). The common acceptance is that anyone who performs the rituals, such as the five daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimage, is a devout Muslim. As a consequence, the default position is that Islamic scholars must answer how and where ritual and dogma form the most important feature in Islam, and where moral and social responsibilities fit in (Yakun, 1990). It is also widely accepted that anyone who believes in the main tenets of Islam, albeit does not practice the main acts of worship prescribed by Islam, is for the benefit of statistics and research at least, considered to be a Muslim. If only in indirect ways, this too has nurtured the image of homogeneity by reducing the visibility of an important dimension of the Muslim experience.

Another issue that is raised is that "Muslim" is used by Muslims themselves as equally a religious, political and a cultural signifier, taking it as their identifier under different circumstances which they use to pressure for action on diverse issues. This allows them to take on the concern of and the appearance of an "ethnic" community pressurizing for different types of rights. "Muslim" thus becomes at once a political, ethnic, cultural as well as a religious affiliation which is also replicated in academic discourse. By implication, the term "Muslim Community" to describe all Sri Lankan Muslims refers to a level of homogeneity across the heterogeneous ideological and geographical groups that constitute Muslims in Sri Lanka, in addition to the challenges of using religious labels as ethnic markers. Consequently, for many Sri Lankan Muslims, this reflects how divisions in terms of heterogeneity (of theology, socio-economic status, geography and so on) are considered a "private" layer of intra-community relations, and to the "outside", for the perspective of inter-community relations, there is a consensus for maintaining at least the veneer of unity, in keeping with the Islamic tenets of One God, One Faith.

Understanding practice and structure of Islam (from a theology perspective) in Sri Lanka, therefore requires global reference to the Islamic traditions, cultures and politics. There have always been traditional differences among Muslims in Sri Lanka over issues of faith, most of which have not provoked serious conflict and have been accepted by religious leaders as part of a broader tolerance in the community. However, since the late 1980s there has been a strong growth in ultra-orthodox interpretations of Islam with a new identity that have provoked conflicts with other interpretations that have existed previously (International Crisis Group, 2007b). This push for a greater Islamic identity has seen an increased articulation of a "pure" Muslim identity that is set in the context of religiosity (and religious practice) but also has transnational Muslim solidarity which is based on a strengthening of reactive identities as a response to the identity-stripping experience of the conflict, generational gaps and globalization.

The duality construct of a "Muslim" identity thus becomes a challenge for the Sri Lankan Muslim community as they profess their Sri Lankan identity (and sense of belonging) and tackle the issue of a religious representation (and a possible transnational affiliation which their protagonists accuse them off).

Sri Lanka's conflicted society

It is not the intention of the authors to provide a detailed history of Sri Lanka, suffice to say, that recent history will have to be revisited briefly to provide the necessary context for community

relations, identity and representation today. It is crucial to provide a broad picture of the causes behind the previous conflicts to understand the tensions between the communities and identify the pertinent issues for the future.

Like many post-colonial societies, Sri Lanka drew on pre-colonial culture, including religion, to form a national identity after gaining independence in 1948, hence the increasing visibility of Buddhist monks in political activism (Deegalle, 2007). The legacy of the colonial period has been blamed by most analysts for sowing the seeds of ethnic division in independent Sri Lanka. British rule fostered and emphasized a new concept of colonial identities, weakening the process of ethnic assimilation that had existed previously (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 1999). Sinhala nationalism emerged in the 19th century as a counter-colonial movement that used Buddhist identity to mobilize popular support against Christian missionaries and later British capitalist interests, especially regarding Indian immigrants who came to work on the plantations (Moore, 1989). Sinhala nationalism was also fuelled by what was seen as the excessive political demands of Tamil leaders and the disproportionate power and position Tamils had gained under British rule. Upon independence, it was inevitable that the Sinhalese would redefine ethnic relations to their advantage and establish a voting system along ethnic-lines (Mohamed Saleem and Imtiyaz, 2015). Consequently, constitutional arrangements at independence lacked sufficient safeguards for minority rights. However, it was not until 1956 that the full political logic of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism would be realized, when the opposition party campaigning on an uncompromising nationalist platform of "Sinhala Only" was swept into power. Their victory effectively reversed the preferential colonial treatment of Tamil elites. However, it also led to the marginalization of minorities along with decades of confrontation between the Tamils and Sinhalese. This in turn set in motion a process which dropped Tamil as an official language, and consequently prevented Tamil speakers, mainly from the minority Tamil and Muslim communities, from having equal legal status. Tamils were now the ones who felt excluded by the language policy and its effects on the availability of public sector jobs and services and started their largely non-violent civil disobedience by democratic Tamil parties, but it was clear that Sri Lanka's path had been intertwined with the concept of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. It also set a trend in Sri Lankan politics of "political upmanship" where the main opposition party would wreck attempts by the party in power to ensure that the country would not benefit from government decisions made at critical junctures.

By the 1970s, it was clear that the government was pressing ahead with its attempts to relegate the position of Tamils (and other minorities) in state sectors, and later in the private sector, thereby exacerbating ethnic tensions. Gradually, civil disobedience led to the emergence of small militant Tamil groups, and the first demands for a separate Tamil state as a bargaining position in the hope of reaching a compromise of a devolution package were made. This was something that the state would never accept, as it was felt that this would lead to national fragmentation.

In 1983, politically motivated anti-Tamil riots in Colombo were sparked by the murder of 13 policemen by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), leading to the murder of as many as 1000 Tamils and the displacement of thousands of others. A major shock, this pogrom against the Tamils provided an opportunity for marginal militant Tamil groups to gain new supporters and to internationalize their struggle. The 1980s and 1990s proved to be violent episodes in Sri Lanka's young history as the LTTE emerged as the predominant force among Tamil militant groups. In particular, with the defeat of the Indian Peacekeeping Force, the mass displacement of Muslims from the north in 1990, and the assassination of key Sri Lankan political and military leaders and Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, the LTTE emerged as one of the world's most formidable politico-military organizations, with its use of suicide bombers and recruitment of child soldiers.

Despite many peace-negotiation attempts in the 1990s, the conflict persisted until 2002, largely as a result of the global environment. A ceasefire agreement (CFA) was signed, leading to the longest period of peace since the early 1980s. A sense of unease persisted despite relative normalization

in the north and east – and the cessation of violence and retaliatory killings undertaken as a result of the weakness of enforcement and accountability outlined by the CFA. With a subsequent change in government in 2005, there was a push to eradicate the LTTE militarily before any political solutions could be considered. This indeed came to pass in May 2009.

In the post 2009 era, there have been at least three incidents of anti-Muslim violence as a result of rising nationalist Sinhala-Buddhist sentiments (Mohamed Saleem, 2020a). The Easter Sunday attacks now pose a new challenge for the country in terms of a potential return to conflict.

Sri Lanka Muslims after 2009: Plights and challenges

On 15 June 2014, the southern town of Aluthgama became a focal point for ethnic clashes between Sinhala and Muslims (Tegal, 2014). For a couple of days, violence ensued in an eerie comparison to the 1983 pogrom that had taken place against the Tamils. While reports as to what sparked the violence are sketchy and there is still a debate as to "who threw the first stone?", it is clear that the backdrop for the violence had been a greater increase of underlying tensions between the Sinhalese and the Muslims especially since the end of the conflict in 2009.

The violence in Aluthgama came on the back of a larger coordinated hate campaign orchestrated by an extreme Sinhala-Buddhist organization called Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) against the Muslim community. It is not entirely clear as to what the origins of the organization are but it is clear that it was behind a systemic campaign inciting hatred that came to a head between 2012 and 2014 (Mohamed Saleem and Imtiyaz, 2015). "The BBS unleashed a cancer" in terms of relationships between the Sinhala and the Muslim communities. The tensions emerge in one aspect out of the end of the 28-year old conflict, which extenuated fragile cracks between different ethnic groups, along faith lines (Mohamed Saleem, 2013). Identity was further exacerbated not only by an insecurity of religious affiliation but a religious affiliation that is borne from a sense of the "other" who is not only someone of a different ethnicity but someone of a different religion. Calhoun : identifies this as part of a wider problem of the era we are living in at the moment, where it is hard "to articulate a shared identity that is strong enough to really bind us to each other and at the same time capacious enough to recognise differences among us" (Calhoun, 2016: 66).

In Sri Lanka, while this insecurity of identity has been felt on all sides, it is the Sinhala-Buddhists, who form the majority of the population, that exhibited the most extreme of strains. As Tambiah said "[t]he Sinhalese manifest the features of a 'majority with a minority complex' that is partly the product of Sri Lanka's miniscule size, both territorially and demographically, and the nature of the exchanges with India, especially South India, that have been interpreted in certain (tendentious) ways. . ." (Tambiah, 1991: 92–93). In particular, the ideological strand of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has undergone a massive change and reinterpretation of its doctrines as a result of the conflict (Deegalle, 2007), becoming more militant, violent and ultimately intolerant towards other ethnicities and religions largely led by the clergy (Noble, 2013).

Post-conflict, the concept of "Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism" has emerged as a potent force (Zuhair, 2016). This has manifested itself especially between 2012 and 2013 in a rise of violence against religious sites and members of religious minorities characterized as "chronic" and "acute" violence (Gunatilleke, 2015). Of the accounted reports, most have been mob attacks on places of worship, robberies and vandalism, the killing of clergy, protests against communities, and the proliferation of hate speech on social media, the Internet and via the audio–visual media (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013). While the majority of cases were initially from the Christian community (mostly against the non-traditional evangelical churches accused of forced conversion), Buddhist temples from the non-Theravada sect and Hindu places of worship, the more visibly aggressive incidents have been the rising anti-Muslim rhetoric and acts of violence such as the high

profile case of the attack on a mosque in Dambulla in the north-east of Sri Lanka in 2012 (BBC News, 2012) and the attacks in Aluthgama in the south of the country in 2014, as part of a coordinated hate campaign by the BBS, targeting the Muslim community in particular from a commercial, social and religious perspective (BBC News Asia, 2013a) and specifically targeting attacks on Muslim businesses. For example, on 28 March 2013, Fashion Bug, a popular Muslim-owned garment chain store was attacked (BBC News Asia, 2013b). Footage shows Buddhist monks leading a crowd of people and then throwing stones at the warehouse in Pepiliyana, while the police stood by and failed to stop the events from unfolding (BBC News Asia, 2013b). Prior to the incident, BBS had circulated a text urging people to boycott Muslim shops and another Buddhist political party the Jathika Hela Urumaya had issued a statement saying: "Sinhalese Buddhists should be determined to teach such Muslim extremists a lesson that they will never forget" (srilankabrief.org, 2013). In particular the Secretariat for Muslims itself has recorded 284 incidents of threats, attempted attacks, harassment, incitements and provocations directed at Muslims in 2013 (Secretariat for Muslims, 2013) and continued to do so well into 2015 (Secretariat for Muslims, 2015) even after there was a government change which brought about a hope that there could be a better respite for the Muslims.

The emergence of such rhetoric and violence has also to be seen in the backdrop of what is being seen as the "Sinhalization" of areas, particularly in the north and east that had little or no Sinhala-Buddhist population previously with state complicity and with the direct involvement or assistance of the military (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013; Zuhair, 2016). This state complicity has also paved the way for Sinhala-Buddhist groups such as the BBS to emerge and launch campaigns aimed at soliciting a reaction particularly from the Muslim community (Imtiyaz and Mohamed Saleem, 2015).

The case of Sri Lankan Muslims: Why Sinhala-Buddhist extremists have constructed Muslims as an enemy

The tensions between the communities manifest themselves largely based on perceptions of each other. The misperceptions have led to the rise of Islamophobia with Muslims being identified as primary threats to Sinhala-Buddhist existence.

The notion of threat felt by Sinhala-Buddhists which is primarily rooted in the "feeling of minority complexity of majority" has meant that there is a constant fear (stoked by politicians and the media) that "Muslims and Tamils will one day rule the island" (Interview with three Sinhala youths via Zoom on 22 December 2020). This is particularly common among Sinhala-Buddhists in rural pockets of southern Sri Lanka where Sinhala-Buddhists have domination, but the majority of them are economically vulnerable and socially powerless and more religious than their counterparts in urban areas in Sri Lanka. Thus, the extreme religious Sinhala-Buddhist forces have very good interactions with village-living poor Sinhala-Buddhists. Historically, "Sinhala nationalism goes back to the British period, when it was part of a broader anti-colonial, anti-foreign movement, accentuated by Buddhist revivalism. It grew stronger with independence and electoral democracy. With society divided along caste, class and political lines, it has been a powerful unifying force, giving radical parties a platform for populist agitation and established politicians a diversion from their failure to address economic weakness, social concerns and pervasive corruption" (International Crisis Group, 2007a).

In addition, it is also important to note that the antipathy of the Sinhalese against the Muslims originates from the early 20th century. The rise of anti-colonial movements also gave oxygen to the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, led by Anagarika Dharmapala, who was the key source of

tensions between the Sinhalese and the Muslims – especially the traders, naming them as enemies of the Sinhalese by religion, race and language (Bartholomeusz, 1999). Commercial rivalry between the Muslims and the Sinhalese thus emerged and remains one of the strong points of discontent (De Silva, 1973: 390–391).

Our communications with selected Sinhala university students from the University of Ruhuna, Matara, suggest that Sinhala-Buddhists forces build their contacts and influence by helping poor Sinhala-Buddhists through giving tuition, loans, and other social service activities. Local politicians who are aware of the ground reality, also help those who would help vulnerable Sinhala-Buddhists in many cases. Apart from socio-economic help, Sinhala-Buddhist activities also include "awareness" programmes (Interview with students from the University of Ruhuna via Zoom in December 2020). While our informants do not have any serious insights about the nature of political programmes being provided by Sinhala-Buddhist activities, it seems Muslims are portrayed as successful business people and thus have a disproportionate influence in Sri Lanka's economy. Our communications also suggest that a section of Sinhala-Buddhists living in southern pockets of Sri Lanka believe that Muslims are inherently violent and they want to convert non-Muslims into Islamic faiths. The same respondents though said that they never had any Muslim friend and/or neighbours (Interview 2020). In addition, the rise of mosques, madrasas, and Muslim women wearing of burqa and niqab appear to have negatively affected the perception of some Sinhala-Buddhists.

The rise of Islamic culture and visible presence of Islamic symbols such as mosques and what is considered as Islamic clothes, according to our communications with Sinhala students, has contributed to the rise of fears and panics among certain Sinhala-Buddhists living in southern Sri Lanka. These forces have basically developed a mythology that though Muslims are a minority numerically, their link to Muslims globally will overpower the Sinhalese as the majority in the island.

It is thus clear that the emergence of Buddhist–Muslim religious confrontation in Sri Lanka in the post-2009 period is a phenomenon driven by the convergence of multiple factors: a sense of beleaguerment within the Buddhist (and Sinhala) community, despite the defeat of the LTTE; a sense that Buddhists and Sinhalese do not occupy the proper place within the Sri Lankan nation as a majority; rapid commercialization of society and a fear that religion and religious institutions are becoming irrelevant, which is a narrative that cuts across both the Sinhala and Muslim communities; the fear of Muslim expansionism and public displays of religiosity and what is perceived as the increasing isolationism within the Muslim community, that is, that there is a concern about the growing visibility which the Muslim community has displayed by their religiosity which then has implications on social/cultural and political expressions; the tendency by both Muslims and Buddhists to see each other as homogeneous blocs; and inadequate sensitivity to the internal conflicts and contradictions within both communities. In addition, it is important to consider other contextual factors including socio-economic and local political priorities, especially that the macro political environment in the country can also play a significant role in shaping ethno-religious relations. The increasingly vociferous presence of extremist Buddhist groups happened in a context where the post-war government until January 2015, deliberately propagated and sustained a discourse of Sinhala triumphalism and at the same time used the media extensively to keep alive the possibility of an LTTE-like threat remerging (Imtiyaz and Mohamed Saleem, 2015). Such a government-sanctioned discourse obviously has/had implications for majority–minority relations in the country. Notwithstanding a global Islamophobia process as well as "the sinister machinations of foreign devils who want to keep the Sri Lankans divided" (Hussein, 2014), the campaign has sought to play on the fear psychosis among the Muslims (from the 1915 riots) which endures to this day.

The campaign has also been grounded in the aspect of social mobility in the wake of an expanding modern economy. There are the competing economic interests which is the other narrative that underpins misperceptions about the Muslim community and that characterizes perceived Muslim

ascendency through the visible success of certain Muslim enterprises, though there is little evidence to suggest that the Muslim community as a whole is economically better off than any other community in the country (Herath and Rambukwalla, 2015). The campaign which manifested in both online and on the ground is symptomatic of one major common denominator. It is about opposing signs of visible Muslim identity that also has an economic dimension; ranging from calls to boycott Muslim companies and Halal products, Halal certification, women's clothing, to protests outside Muslim-owned retail outlets (Mohamed Saleem, 2013). Interestingly, a significant portion of the members and supporters of BBS not only hail from middle-class and upper-class backgrounds in urban areas that have decent education and are affiliated to good money-making professional jobs, but there is much support from Sri Lankan expatriates living abroad (Mohamed Saleem, 2013). The growing disenchantment in the Sinhala-Buddhist community on many fronts, their economic and cultural insecurity in particular, at least in part has made it easier for nationalistic political posturing to re-capture its lost appeal. Thus, there is a heavy interest of Sinhala business involved in these campaigns, which has been capitalized on by certain nationalist political parties for their own gain (Hussein, 2014). The steady rise of unsubstantiated claims about Muslims by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist forces contributed to the wave of the anti-Islam campaign in southern Sri Lanka.

Muslims and post-Easter Sunday

On the 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday, multiple explosions rocked the Sri Lankan cities of Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, leaving over 200 dead and hundreds wounded (Imtiyaz, 2020). These were the worst terror attacks to hit the island since 1996 when the Central Bank was attacked by the LTTE during the 30-year old war that ended in May 2009. For many Sri Lankans, the attacks – the first in 10 years after a period of relative peace – brought back not only memories of the violent conflict which had engulfed the country, but also new worries for the future.

As it transpired that the terrorist perpetrators were from a local radical Islamic organization that would eventually be linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the local Muslim community came under intense scrutiny and backlash. The government banned women from wearing the *niqab* (face covering) as part of emergency regulations and the general public and security forces increased harassment of the community (Irshad, 2019). The worst fears of the local Muslim community of a violent backlash against them were realized when, a few weeks after the attacks, Muslim-owned property was destroyed and a Muslim civilian killed at the hands of mobs (Amarasingam and Fuller, 2019) in a wave of anti-Muslim violence in several parts of the island.

The backlash against the Muslim community has come after years of weakening community relations and heightened tensions between Muslim and Sinhalese communities in particular, following the end of the 30-year civil war in 2009 (Mohamed Saleem, 2020a). The government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) has been struggling to articulate a mechanism and process to channel grievances and deal with the root causes for the LTTE uprising in a political system that was already weak in upholding fundamental rights and representation for minorities. In addition, post-conflict reconciliation and trust-building between the various communities at the grassroots level were not prioritized, as the GOSL focused on constitutional reforms and establishing mechanisms to deal with transitional justice. The reactions since the Easter Sunday attacks, exposed that weakness, given the lack of prioritization given to grassroots community relations and the failure to deal with trust deficits and misperceptions between communities (Mohamed Saleem, 2019).

Community tensions across the island were at an all-time-high as the 10th anniversary commemorating the war's end coincided with the marking of a month since the Easter Sunday attacks. Sri Lanka has been prone to violent conflicts every decade since the 1970s so there is a real fear

that the island is on the brink of another outbreak of violence. The urgent question now is how to ensure that previous mistakes are not repeated.

For the Muslim community in particular, the events of 21 April 2019 mark a watershed moment for Muslim identity and representation in Sri Lanka. Almost overnight, being a Muslim has become an accusation as well as a religious affiliation. Many organizations and individuals have had to respond in the public sphere to address the demonization of a whole religion because of the actions of a few (Imtiyaz, 2021). For the Muslims of Sri Lanka, this accusation was, and remains, a double-edged sword impacting their religious and ethnic representation, their relationship with the other communities, and their transnational relationship to Muslims from outside the country. In the light of growing Buddhist ethno-nationalism, especially after the end of the conflict in Sri Lanka in 2009 and in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks, Muslims have been burdened with defending a religious identity and an ethnic representation that has become institutionalized since the time of the British rule in the country but open to scrutiny, especially in their relationship with the global community of Muslims. There have now been calls for the Muslim community to "reform" and become "moderate" to show their "Sri Lankan identity" (Mohamed Saleem, 2019).

However, these demands for reform and demonstrable allegiance are accompanied by a sense of anger, frustration and despair, because it is difficult to fully understand the identity of the Sri Lankan Muslim and where the "Muslim" fits into the Sri Lankan national consciousness. This apparent vacuum of understanding the reality of the Muslim lived experience in Sri Lanka is not made any easier by global dynamics and geopolitics around Islam and Muslims, thereby exacerbating a scenario where Muslims in Sri Lanka are now viewed with suspicion, especially following the Easter Sunday attacks.

Though the backlash from the Easter Sunday attacks has been particularly intense against the Muslim community, it mirrors violent incidents in Sri Lanka in recent history which signify a rising Islamophobic tension and the worrying incitement to violence (Bengali, 2018). This echoes narratives that have been present in mainstream Western media for a long time where Islam is seen simply as a religion of unintelligible crazed violence perpetrated by mass-murdering fanatics. This type of sentiment, common in the West, is now common in Sri Lanka and is increasingly reflected in the media coverage as well as mainstream narratives in Sri Lanka (Mazumdaru, 2018).

Effects of COVID-19 pandemic

One year after the Easter Sunday attacks, that same feeling that was there post-attack emerged as responsible for feeding an anti-Muslim narrative to falsely explain how the novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 has spread in Sri Lanka. This has been pushed by national media and supported by some politicians, leading to a feeling of *déjà vu* in terms of Islamophobia. The racism displayed in the media portrayed the Muslim community as being a "barbaric, unpatriotic and irresponsible community" that was responsible for the spreading of COVID-19 (Mohamed Saleem, 2020b).

Sri Lanka's first COVID-19 death occurred in March 2020, and the patient was cremated (*The Times of India*, 2020). The practice of cremation is considered the traditional method for disposing of Buddhists and Hindus. However, for Muslims, the traditional form of resting a body is burial. In addition Christians and Jews also would seek burial as a standard means of resting dead bodies. But the government of Sri Lanka, citing environmental reasons, decided to cremate all dead bodies arising from COVID-19, including Muslims and Christians. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government claimed that burying deceased victims of COVID-19 could contaminate groundwater, despite World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines that stipulate burials are safe and pose no risk during the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020).

The government's cremation policy has frustrated and annoyed the Sri Lankan Muslim community following the Easter Sunday fall out (Mohamed Saleem, 2020a). Many suspect the government of being insensitive to local minorities and want to use COVID-19 as an excuse to overcome failures of governance and to mobilize Sinhala-Buddhist constituencies as a distraction of the failures. In addition this distraction is suspected of being used as a reward for Sinhala-Buddhist extremist forces. Our communications with Buddhist monks in preparation for this paper suggest that nationalist-minded Buddhist monks are pleased with the government policy on cremation and they have praised the government for not accommodating Muslim concerns over burial. However, in a country where minorities have been traditionally marginalized and discriminated against, the fact that Muslims who fall victim to COVID-19 are unjustly prevented from being laid to rest in accordance with their religious beliefs and are forcibly cremated, should come as no surprise. The act of cremating a dead body is forbidden in Islam, and the callous disregard for religious rites shown by the state has, understandably, caused tremendous distress among the Muslim community. While it is becoming increasingly difficult for Muslims in Sri Lanka to live in peace, with the constant fear of further threats, discrimination, and violence hanging over the community, the government has used COVID-19 as an excuse to ensure Muslims in Sri Lanka cannot even die in peace (Mahamoor, 2020).

The first Muslim COVID-19 body was cremated against the wishes of the family sending shock waves across the Muslim community. Ever since the first local COVID-19 patient was identified, the government and its public health authorities have stubbornly refused to heed fervent calls from various leaders, human rights bodies, both local and international, to respect religious and cultural rights of the Muslim and Christian communities and stop the practice of forced cremation of dead bodies arising from COVID-19. There have also been many cases where Muslim bodies were cremated on a false pretext of being COVID-19 positive. This made the Muslim community averse to testing in some instances (Harees, 2020).

Though the GOSL did not release the ethnic ratio of COVID-19 deaths, unofficial data suggest that as of December 2020, Muslims, constituted around 10% of Sri Lanka's population and shared 40% of the total COVID-19 related deaths (Harees, 2021), the fact is that the death rate from COVID-19 in Sri Lanka is higher among people who identify as Muslims than Sinhala-Buddhists or Hindus or Christians or those with no stated religion. The question to be asked is why do Muslims have disproportionately high COVID 19 related deaths than others? There is no clear answer to this question. However, Sri Lanka Muslims generally live in economically vulnerable conditions. This could demonstrate that a substantial part of the difference in mortality between ethnoreligious groups is based on the different circumstances in which members of these groups are known to live; for example, those living in areas with higher levels of socio-economic deprivation usually leads to health consequences. However, Sinhalese and Tamils also live in such conditions, so the economically vulnerable conditions are just one cause. There are other causes that need to be understood such as the language used to share information about COVID-19. There are also other suspicions that non-related COVID-19 deaths are also being forcibly cremated to elevate numbers of Muslim deaths and pointing the finger of suspicion to the community as being the cause of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the insistence of the Sri Lankan authorities for cremation of COVID-19 victims has added some pressure to the Muslim communities. It is patently clear that the decision to enforce cremations on Muslims was taken on arbitrary grounds without any scientific evidence, contrary to WHO guidelines, and its motivations must be questioned. Several international initiatives have been taken to highlight the sad plight of the Muslims in Sri Lanka. For example, the Muslim Council of Britain (2020) has already taken steps to take the complaint before the United Nations Human Rights Committee and have launched a fund in this regard.

The COVID-19 experience has fundamentally challenged the Muslims' trust in the state and institutions. Our communications suggest that some Muslims believe that the GOSL adopted cremation for all policy to appease Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists. We do not have any solid evidence to support their position, but the GOSL failed to take action against Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists, who openly claimed that Muslims are knowingly spreading COVID-19 to hurt the country. Moreover, some Muslims fear that the GOSL's COVID-19 cremation policies would help them to lose confidence in the system. The Sri Lanka experience suggests that when minorities lose confidence, some members of the community may resort to violence against the state (Imtiyaz and Stavis, 2008). Thus, there should be a scientific investigation into the question about why did COVID-19 kill more Muslims than others in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

As a "third party" in the complex ethnic politics of Sri Lanka, the Muslim community has been transformed under its influence and forced to define itself and seek its own discourse. However, this has also meant that there has been an element of naivety in how the community has conducted itself when trying to forge its own identity, particularly when simultaneously balancing the combination of external ethno-nationalist rivalries with internal Islamic doctrinal conflict. Muslims have struggled, and continue to struggle, to articulate their grievances in a manner that is conducive to maintaining confidence with the other two ethnic groups and that could correct the current misconceptions about Muslims' place in the country after the conflict and after the Easter Sunday Attacks. While questions have to be asked around identity and belonging of the Muslim community and questioning, this does not abrogate responsibility from those in authority that are driving the radical Sinhala-Buddhist narrative. In short, the Muslim community cannot be ignored or marginalized (by the Tamil nor the Sinhala polity), when considering the future of Sri Lanka. However, their self-defined role is dependent on seeing themselves as part of the solution rather than an additional problem. A comprehensive platform and identity (based on Islamic ethical principles) that takes the whole community and country into consideration need to be articulated.

This is the challenge facing not only the Muslim community in Sri Lanka but also others outside the community to create a system and processes that provide the space for those conversations to take place.

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