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Strategic Imperatives of Muslim Leadership in Post-War Sri Lanka: Citizenship, Rights and Reconciliation

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Abstract. This study examines how a few selected mainstream Sri Lankan Muslim civil organisations have been responding to the Sinhala Buddhist ideological paradigm in post-war Sri Lanka. The ideology perceives that Sinhala Buddhists are true citizens of Sri Lanka while minorities are "others" or "guests". Hence, the ideology plays a structural role in generating anti-Muslim sentiments in post-war Sri Lanka. Contrary to prevailing wisdom which argues that minorities attempt to deconstruct the majoritarian ideological foundation in their struggle for equality, dominant and mainstream Muslim civil society organisations in Sri Lanka have chosen to reconcile with it while resisting only its practical implications upon the community. Even though this strategy brings self-contradictory elements into play on theoretical grounds, Muslim civil society organisations think that it is a practically reasonable strategy given the developing socio-political context of the state. Based on primary and secondary data and the thematic qualitative analysis, this study builds an argument by analysing discourses of the selected mainstream Muslim organisations that minorities pick strategies for their struggle against majoritarian state and ideology taking their political and other demographical realities into account. Hence, their choices are not static but rather dynamic.

Keywords and phrases: majoritarianism, minority rights, Muslim minority, anti-Muslim sentiments, post-war Sri Lanka

Introduction

The constitution of Sri Lanka clearly states that the state shall give foremost preference to Buddhism (Sri Lankan Constitution Art. 09, p. 03). This constitutional clause produces a legitimate justification to give certain privileges to the religion of the majority over others. In light of this, other religions and cultural communities are portrayed as "other" or "foreign" in the public domain (Welikala 2015). Consequently, the argument is used to instigate anti-minority sentiment in the country. In other words, exclusivist majoritarianism survives through constitutional protection. As such, post-war anti-Muslim narratives are being justified, specifically by using the argument of protecting the exclusive Buddhist state. In this regard, Gunathilake (2021, 27) states:

> Sri Lanka's constitutional text contains certain doctrinal weaknesses that enable majoritarianism. First, article 9 of the Constitution stipulates that Buddhism be given the "foremost place" and imposes a duty on the state to "protect and foster" the Buddha Sasana. Article 9 goes on to mention that the state should assure "to all religions the rights granted by articles 10 and 14(1)(e)", i.e. the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the freedom to manifest religion or belief. In practice, however, this clause has shaped the way the state justifies limitations on the religious freedom of minorities, particularly when the impugned conduct is perceived as threatening the status of Buddhism in the country.

Under such a state, equal citizenship and rights of the minorities are compromised in favour of the majority racial-religious group. Consequently, the identity and political survival of minorities, including the Muslim minority community, face the need for a pragmatic political adjustment. The Muslims, being the most vulnerable minorities in the country, have, the mainstream Muslim civil society organisations, tried to develop a new discourse on how to engage with the dominant exclusivist tendencies of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism. The new discourse has helped Muslim civil society to drive the post-war inter-community trust-building efforts between Muslims and majority Buddhist communities as well as to develop a new model of socio-cultural empowerment strategy for Muslim communities. In evaluating the general trend of these responses, one scholar has pointed out that "justice and accountability rarely feature as dominant demands among Muslims whose response to violations and attacks by the state, has been largely placid and reconciliatory" (Mihlar 2021, 110). However, the answer to the question of why Muslim civil society leadership did not demand justice and human rights, lies in their perspective on how to confront the Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism and its exclusive version of citizenship narratives in the Sri Lankan context.

Against this background, this study attempts to critically examine the discourses of Muslim civil society organisations in terms of addressing the central tenets of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism and its implication for the idea of equal citizenship in the country. Applying a vigorous thematic analysis, this study argues that Muslim civil society organisations believe that they can reap the socio-legal benefits of equal citizenship while being silent on the majoritarian vision of the state and its implications on citizenship and equal rights. Theoretically, this is a synthesis of two self-contradictory notions. However, what shapes the emerging discourse of citizenship of the community of Muslim civil society organisations is the overall context of political reality in post-war Sri Lanka. Hence, political realism is what drives the citizenship discourse of Sri Lankan Muslim civil society. In other words, the so-called Muslim leadership sees that although its narrative is theoretically incoherent, it is practically reasonable.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Jamal (2007) offered an alternative framework to explain the political strategy of minorities in realising equality in an ethnocentric state. He says that minorities view citizenship as an opportunity to challenge and reform the predominant features of an ethnocentric state system that is being utilised to marginalise them and to produce structural violence against them rather than resorting to radical means such as trying to dismantle the system of state totally (Jamal 2007). It is an established fact that the concept of citizenship is an exclusive idea in an ethnocentric state as:

> In some settings, nation is imagined as an ethnocultural community distinct from the citizenry of the state. When nation is imagined in this way, nationalism can be internally as well as externally exclusive, for it can define some fellow residents, even fellow citizens, as outsiders to, perhaps even enemies of, the nation (emphasis added). (Jamal 2007, 265)

Although this exclusiveness is embedded in the citizenship concept of an ethnocentric state with regards to minority statuses, it is viewed as an opportunity despite its shortcomings for minorities in order to express their concern in civic means and to develop a challenging counter-narrative against oppressive majoritarian tendencies and structural features that produce systematic violence (Jamal 2007).

Furthermore, he observed an interesting political reality in majority-minority relationships in this process. It is that a majoritarian ethnocentric state with its people tries to exclude the minority from benefiting equally from the state resources and to sustain systematic features that undermine the minority empowerment by arguing that the majority communities are the real sons of the soil. They are full citizens who are entitled to enjoy the comprehensive privileges of citizenship. In contrast, minorities view citizenship, though it is exclusive, as an opportunity and a strategic option to counter the ethnic majoritarian narratives and to deconstruct ethnocentric features of the system from within (Jamal 2007).

That is to say that the two mutually exclusive and opposing dynamics "co-exist" within the same ethnocentric context. While majority deals with the citizenship concept in an ethnocentric state as a "control mechanism" over minority privileges, the minorities use the same concept as an "opportunity" to challenge the ethnocentric system. In this background, Jamal (2007) proposed a new term, "politics of contention", to understand the minority's strategic thinking in an ethnocentric state. Here, politics of contention is defined as a minority community's strategic moves towards challenging the ethnocentric system, which helps to reproduce systematic violence against them, from within and being part of it.

While being informed by this crucial theoretical insight of Jamal on how minorities view and confront a majoritarian state through the possible means of "citizenship", this research deploys an analytical framework to study the discourses of Muslim civil society leadership in engaging with the exclusivist dimensions of the Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian vision of the Sri Lankan state and its legal and political implications on equal rights and citizenship.

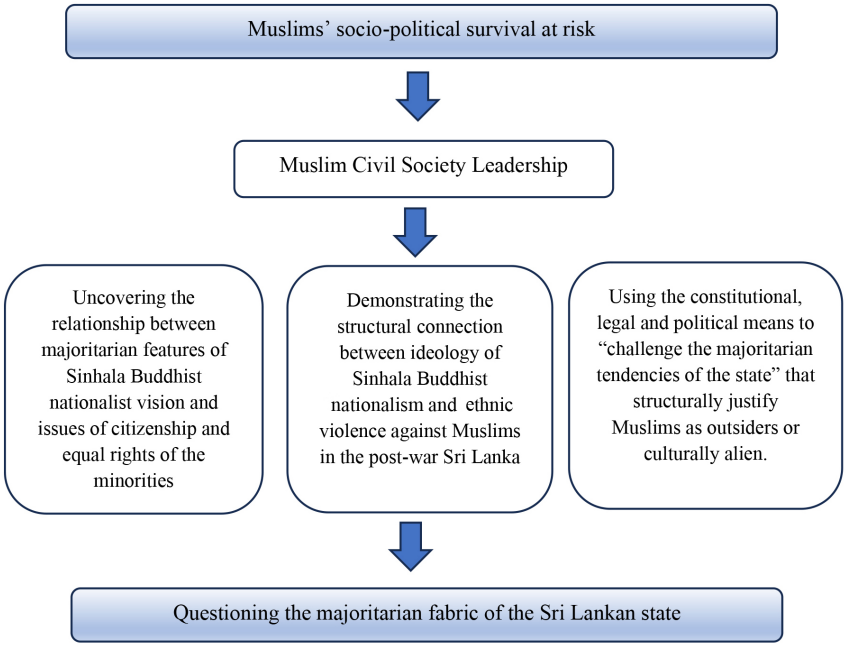

Figure 1. Analytical framework

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative approach which tries to understand the perceptions, feelings, beliefs and interpretations of human society from both subjective and intersubjective perspectives. As this research aims to analyse the experiences and discourses of Muslim community-based organisations and their internal discussions and changes in facing the majoritarian tendencies in Sri Lanka in the post-war (2010–2020) context, the qualitative approach offers the required flexibility to reflect on the ideas of the Muslim leadership of Sri Lanka with its internal dynamism and gradual developments.

The data for this research was derived largely from primary sources through in-depth semi-structured interviews which included open-ended questions. The interviewees were selected from the executive members of six mainstream Muslim community organisations that are seen as the prime drivers and have been directing the Muslim community in the post-war context. Apart from members representing those entities, interviews were conducted with eight independent socio-political activists of the community as well. As such, the interviewees were selected from the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, National Shoora Council, the Muslim Council

of Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan Jamath E Islami, Organisation of Muslims Students' Education and Development and Salamah Society. Other primary sources include official documents, leaflets and magazines, published by Muslim community-based organisations. While acknowledging the fact that no one can claim the perspectives of these organisations and community leaders represent the aspirations and visions of two million Muslims of Sri Lanka together, it is certainly possible to argue that these organisations played a crucial role in shaping the responses of the community to the socio-political issues at large in post-war Sri Lanka. Moreover, these organisations are seen as "popular leaders" of the so-called Muslim civil society, a contested position within the socio-political landscape of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. The collected data was interpreted by applying a thematic content analysis method as it offers leverage to navigate deep into the narratives of social actors to understand them better.

Table 1. The six mainstream Muslim community organisations

Name of the Organisation	Type of the Organisation
All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama	Supreme council of Muslim theologians
National Shoora Council	Umbrella organisation
Muslim Council of Sri Lanka	Umbrella organisation (advocacy group)
Sri Lanka Jamath E Islami	Socio-religious movement
Salamah Society	Socio-religious movement
Organisation of Muslim Students' Education and Development	Student organisation

Sri Lankan Muslim Politics and Society: A Survey on Contemporary Discourse

For the last seven decades, the dynamics of the Sri Laken Muslim community have largely been analysed considering their party politics. These studies have tried to conceptualise Muslim politics through various concepts such as "politics of survival" (Ali 1986) or "opportunistic politics" and "accommodative politics" or "instrumentalist politics" (Knoerzer 1998). Why Muslims picked up such a strategy is the biggest question that demands a critical exploration. Some experts say that it was an impact of ethnic riots against Muslims in 1915. The riots informed Muslim leaders that they should not challenge the supremacism of the Buddhists and their interests in any case (Ali 1986). Furthermore, Imtiyaz (2012) offered another explanation stating that the Muslim political leadership of the South and Muslim business community maintained a close connection "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".

Some experts highlight that Muslim politics shifted towards a new direction in the 1980s as the civil war erupted between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam and the Sri Lankan state. It is important to note that one-third of the Muslim population dwells in the north-eastern part of the Island nation. Being a community, trapped within the brutal civil war, thus far marginalised Eastern Muslims capitalised on their political might shaping the cause of the Muslim political trajectory of Sri Lanka. Hence, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) emerged as a dominant political party representing Eastern Muslims in terms of bringing their political demands into mainstream political debates in Sri Lanka. These dynamics changed the centre of gravity of the Muslim political landscape from west to eastern Sri Lanka. Eventually, the international community started to speak to the SLMC to know of the concerns of the Muslim community in developing any peace settlements (Knoerzer 1998).

The dominant role of Eastern Muslims under the leadership of SLMC completely altered the political culture of Sri Lankan Muslims. Hence, the party deployed many divisive ethnic and religious discourses for political mobilisation. To say otherwise, the political strategy of Sri Lankan Muslims shifted towards right-based demands (Sarjoon and Yousoff 2017). Moreover, the party stressed that Sri Lankan Muslims too have their own distinct political identity. The growing complex and broader ethicised political climate of Sri Lanka further helped these discourses flourish (Thaheer 2010). Nevertheless, the political discourses and strategy of SLMC did not lead to disassociating itself from mainstream political parties. The SLMC played a vital role as a part of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the ruling party between 1994 to 2002 (Imtiyaz 2012).

Post-war Sri Lanka saw a totally different dynamic. The focus changed from Muslim politics to Muslim civil society activism. During this period, the Muslim community had become the new villain that secretly worked to corrupt the purity of the Buddhist land in the view of Buddhist majoritarian groups and political parties. These developments led the recent scholarship to address the inter-communal relationships and dynamics between Muslims and the majority Buddhist community and the responses of the Muslim community leadership to majoritarian onslaught. These works have made a few key substantial contributions to expanding the contemporary scholarship on studies of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. They have aimed to capture the historical evolution of inter-communal relationships between Muslims and Buddhist communities and their existing patterns. They argue that mostly the colonial policies and its legacy in the post-colonial context are two main factors that are largely responsible for conflicts between Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities in the country (Sarjoon 2019). Simultaneously, they highlight that both post-colonial Buddhist fundamentalism and the exclusive nature of Islamic revivalism also contributed to deepening the

mistrust between communities (Imtiyaz 2020). In the same vein, a few scholarly attempts have been made to analyse the post-war anti-Muslim sentiments in the country. Specifically, they explained how majoritarian movements target the religious and socio-political freedom of Muslims. They further meticulously capture different faces of Islamophobia in the country, including the anti-Muslim hate campaigns after the tragic easter Sunday attacks (Mujahidin 2023).

In addition, some scholars have started to explore and evaluate the role and strategies of Muslim civil society organisations in terms of countering the majoritarian tendencies of the state and ultra-nationalist groups. In her detailed study, Haniffa (2021) argues that All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, a premiere body of theologians, who have led the community in responding to the anti-Muslim sentiments, have chosen reconciliation over justice. Moreover, she pointed out that since the anti-Muslim Islamophobic movements' primary target was to question the legitimacy of All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, the body could not develop a forceful counter-argument against them. Hence, she suggests that the Sri Lankan Muslim community needs to find some alternative bodies that can produce substantial responses to anti-Muslim sentiments (Haniffa 2021, 229–254). Afra analyses the role of the National Shura Council, a prominent collective of Sri Lankan Muslim civil society organisations, and their overall strategies in managing the post-war crisis. Her work mainly revolves around National Shura Council's strategic interventions in terms of building co-existence with the Buddhist community (Afra and Ushama 2023).

All these critical contributions have improved the scholarly understanding of the Sri Lankan Muslims. Nevertheless, there is no substantial work that has been done on how Sri Lankan Muslim leadership views the nature of the Sri Lankan state, the role of Buddhism in state formation and its impact on their political rights. It is vital to explore these aspects since Muslim leadership's ideas on these foundational aspects mainly shape their strategic thinking and societal interventions in terms of manoeuvring majoritarianism in the country.

Analysis

Muslim leadership and the citizenship and rights discourses

This section attempts to explore the perspectives of Muslim civil society organisations on the role of Buddhism in Sri Lankan state formation, its legitimacy, and its impact on minorities. After reviewing the interviewees' ideas, the research found that the discourse of Muslim civic society organisations has five interconnected elements through which they constructed the overall framework to understand the notion of the Buddhist state and how to withstand it.

Natural legitimacy of the Buddhist state and status of minorities

Firstly, Sri Lankan Muslim civil society activists accept that there is a legitimate case for the Sri Lankan state to declare itself as the protector of Buddhism. In justifying the state ideology or the idea of state protection to the religion of the majority, they argued that if the religion of the majority in the country is Buddhism, it is natural that the state should give extra importance to the Buddhist people. This is a normal logic under the current state system, like the case of Malaysia and Saudi Arabia etc. They further say that "based on this background, we cannot refute the legitimacy of the Buddhist state as most people of this country are Buddhists" (Respondent 3, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019). They further acknowledged that:

> Buddhism is an ancient religion. Buddhism is deeply rooted in Sri Lanka. This is a fact and a valid justification. We cannot simply refute this historical truth. This is history. Sri Lanka has a historical responsibility to protect the Theravada version of Buddhism. (Respondent 10, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019)

In their discourse, the Sri Lankan state has a civilisational responsibility to protect Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Thus, it is acceptable that the state shall give the foremost place to Buddhism over others. By saying that "this is a fact" and "a historical truth", they attempt to put extra emphasis on an essential point that minorities cannot question the primacy of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the name of rights and equality. Instead, minorities should accept the historical dominance of Buddhism in the country and shape their discourses and political struggle accordingly.

Moving ahead, the respondents stand by an argument that such state recognition for Buddhism does not necessarily cross the interests of minorities either. The fundamental justification for such a perspective is the historical legacy of the inter-community relationship between Muslims and Buddhists. In pre-modern times, Muslims accepted the superiority of Buddhism. They acknowledged the idea of state protection of the religion. However, such recognition did not generate conflict with minorities necessarily. Here, one respondent explained:

> Let's revisit the pre-independent period and understand how the Buddhist-Muslim relationship had been structured. Then we Muslims accepted that they were kings, and they were leaders. The Muslims cooperated with them. This was the logic… Buddhists are our elder brothers, and we are younger brothers. No issue with that and it was a very clear perspective… —as a result—the the constitutional clause which gives the foremost place to Buddhism is not discriminatory and we can live without challenging it. (Respondent 1, *pers. comm.*, 8th October 2019)

By endorsing the same narrative, a respondent said that "before colonisation, Buddhists were best Buddhists, Hindus were best Hindus and Muslims were real Muslims. They had the real religious values active in their life, merging as one common human value system" (Respondent 2, *pers. comm.*, 7th October 2019). For him, it was not only the Muslims who cooperated with kings, but the majority were also attached to real religious values and, thus, respected Muslims. Therefore, another respondent stressed that Sri Lanka had a tolerant form of Buddhism and peacefully co-existed with all other communities. This has been the case with Muslims for over 10 centuries, as stated by one of the respondents, "I will not challenge the primacy of Buddhism in Sri Lanka" (Respondent 22, *pers. comm.*, 7th November 2019).

Ironically, although these respondents portray Sri Lanka has a very tolerant form of Buddhism, Buddhist majoritarian forces clearly propagate that Muslims are others and not true citizens or sons of the soil. To respond to this question, the Muslim leadership has added a third dimension to their discourse – anti-Muslim campaigns are done by some "bad boys".

Treating implications of the majoritarian state as acts of some "bad boys"

Despite Sri Lankan Muslim civil society activists strategically accepting the idea of privilege and the states' sponsorship of Buddhism in the country and then, justifying it considering the pre-colonial memories and the political imaginations, they could not hide the inherent crisis of such a discourse either. As a result, one respondent argues:

They—Sinhalese Buddhists—should explain to us what they mean when they say that:

> This is a Buddhist country… Our problem is when they use the Buddhist state discourse to legitimatise the oppression and marginalisation of minorities… we need a clear answer on how the Buddhist state will deal with its minorities. What sorts of freedom do they have? It should not cross the fundamental rights of the Muslim community (emphasis added). (Respondent 3, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019)

Another respondent endorsed the same narrative, but he used an interesting term of "equal rights" along with his support for the Buddhist state in his statement, "My perspective is that this is a Buddhist majority country and thus they get the state sponsorship. But we endorse that we are a minority, and we also have the 'equal rights' in this country" (Respondent 1, *pers. comm.*, 8th October 2019).

These conflicting narratives of community leaders shed light on their efforts to find a convincing way to balance the demands of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the Muslims' quest for equal treatment and citizenship within a single formula. Some respondents further mentioned that real Buddhism would not allow them to do injustice to minorities or threaten their fundamental rights. Instead, those who try to oppose minorities are political manipulators, not faithful Buddhists. Anti-Muslim hate began with and was sustained by some political racists. One of the prominent Muslim civic activists writes:

> Buddhist philosophy is clean. However, the Buddhists who behave un-Buddhistically and, those who protect such violators, those who fool the innocent masses by displaying reverence by erecting symbols of Buddhism, those who stand to pay obeisance to monks who are violators are those who barter this great teaching for a little worldly gain. These are the culprits who damage, tarnish and dent Buddhism; Let them be from among the monks, the laymen, the racists, the extremists, the politicians or whoever. (Yousuf 2016)

Another respondent opined:

> When we say that this is a Buddhist country, we should analyse whether we have pure Buddhism here. We don't have any problem if the country behaves like what Buddhism tells us to behave. Then, it is a good option. Then the impact is positive. (Respondent 12, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019)

Another prominent member of the Muslim civil society went even further to argue that those who are propagating the state ideology of Buddhism as a tool for oppressing minorities are those who "become Buddhists for political reason. They are political converts. So, the true Buddhists never became the rulers. True Buddhism is the state religion and it's the best religion" (Respondent 2, *pers. comm.*, 7th October 2019).

Eventually, one respondent expressed that minorities should be able to give some "charitable interpretations" to some sensitive constitutional clauses – that seem to target minorities and their religions for the sake of their longer survival. This compromise will prevent the hardline majoritarian forces from mainstreaming their discourses and limit their influence in the policy formulation process (Respondent 22, *pers. comm.*, 7th November 2019). The implicit notion that runs through this perspective is also to prevent some bad boys, who have been responsible for the anti-minority trends in the country, from taking over power.

Ethnic violence and its root causes

Sri Lankan Muslims have been facing persistent ethnic violence for a decade now. Experts link the root cause of the problem to the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology of the state and the legal impunity that majoritarian groups enjoy. However, the Muslim civil society activists have some other perspectives. Thereby, some respondents think that Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian groups are agents of global powers. Equally, the post-war anti-Muslim violence is a political project managed by some mischievous forces who act under the cover of protecting Buddhism. After relating the primary root cause of post-war anti-Muslim violence to the regional political dynamics, one respondent commented that "we can think about different reasons for the anti-Muslim violence if the location of Sri Lanka is somewhere else and if Sri Lanka has the power to decide its fate" (Respondent 8, *pers. comm.*, 29th October 2019). For him, Sri Lanka's location is strategic, and world powers are trying to control the Island. The anti-Muslim violence is a result of such development.

Expanding the same frame of reference further, a respondent situated anti-Muslim sentiments within the border US-China rivalry and more considerable geo-political changes in the Indian Ocean. In this power game, for them, "the US wants to control China, and thus, it tries to challenge the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka… China is also increasing its presence in Sri Lanka. India wants to control many parts of Sri Lanka" (Respondent 9, *pers. comm.*, 18th October 2019). Hence, "America, India and Israel all are on the same axis, and they have a collective strategy on Sri Lanka". In this struggle for power and exploitation, "Muslims are scapegoated and the Buddhists are used" (Respondent 9, *pers. comm.*, 18th October 2019). In addition, another respondent highlighted a similar point, saying that "local politicians were managed by their international masters. They guide the local actors in targeting Muslims as a sound electoral strategy. Local actors attempted to get legitimacy for their acts by aligning themselves with those powers" (Respondent 23, *pers. comm.*, 30th October 2019). Regarding when this reciprocal deal occurred, a respondent mentioned that "we found it in 2012. Bodu Bala Sena visited Norway that year. We feel that they gained the strength to create issues related to the Muslim community after visiting Norway" (Respondent 22, *pers. comm.*, 7th November 2019).

According to Muslim activists, post-war ethnic violence has two aspects: international and local. From the perspective of the local context, the post-war anti-Muslim violence was an outcome of a plot, planned by the political actors who try to manipulate the feelings of people for their electoral benefits.

All those events—anti-Muslim violence—are shaped by the name of fake Buddhist awakening. Those are full of lies, greed, hatred, intolerance and all the discourses of hate are founded by the politicians. The politicians have already hijacked Buddhism now. They try to hide the unethical practices by the cover of Buddhism. The previous governments have strategically created a narrative that one should either be with the Buddhist awakening project or with liberal inclusivism. This binary painting is devastating the country right now (Respondent 2, *pers. comm.*, 7th October 2019).

By taking the discourse even further, another respondent viewed that the significant reason for anti-Muslim violence is the political culture of Sri Lanka. (Respondent 3, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019). Quite differently, one of the respondents added a political economy dimension to the problem. Politicians used anti-Muslim sentiments to divert the attention of the people from the real economic crisis of the country (Respondent 16, *pers. comm.*, 16th October 2019). However, ill-intentioned politicians created the problem in the end, again.

It is interesting to observe that most of the Muslim civil activists and community leaders do not think that Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology operates as an independent structural factor of the problem. Instead, international political powers and local politicians use the ideology to polarise people for their political goals. The anti-Muslim violence was the act of some bad boys who represent a "corrupted version of Buddhism". In other words, the problem is politicians and some racist hooligans.

Muslim activists on the Muslim culture

For the last few years, various Buddhist majoritarian movements have been vigorously promoting a discourse that Muslims are trying to Islamise the public culture of Sri Lanka. Specifically, the majoritarian forces try to depict Muslim women's dress code of burqa/niqab as a direct and explicit symbol of cultural invasion. Exceptionally, in this case, the Muslim civil society activists emphatically acknowledge that the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology is operating behind such recent cultural attacks on Muslims. They attempt to logically deconstruct the majoritarian roots of such attacks, as one respondent stated:

> We must analyse what type of culture Buddhists are practising now. In their dress code, attitude and habits! This is a basic question. On the other hand, by seeing the dress code of the Muslim community, the majority of people think that they are going away from Sri Lankan culture. Ok! What is their dress code? Do they follow their own traditional dress code? They are following the Western dress code. (Respondent 12, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019)

In a more vigorous manner, another respondent argued that what is really happening is a "cultural invasion" of the majority over the minority, not vice-versa. The majority is trying to drag the minority in line with their cultural outlook by accusing the minority as culturally alien to this country (Respondent 10, *pers. comm.*, 15th October 2019). Another respondent stated the same argument in a brutally clear fashion as follows:

> I think that majoritarianism plays a key role in making these allegations… The Sinhalese truly feel fear that this country will be captured by the Muslims in the future. The Sinhalese think that Muslims, being a minority, attempt to subordinate the majority by their increasing economic power. (Respondent 7, *pers. comm.*, 14th October 2019)

It is important to observe that on the one hand, Muslim leaders say that they accept the cultural supremacism of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. However, on the other, they try to challenge the very notion they accepted when the discussion reaches the cultural aspects of Muslims. Hence, one can easily conclude that Muslim discourse suffers from serious self-contradiction. However, a leading Muslim community activist explains that it looks like a self-contradiction in theory, but it works practically. It means that Muslims of Sri Lanka accept the supremacism of cultural Buddhism in theory. They resist when the theory is put into practice by the majoritarian forces (Respondent 18, *pers. comm.*, 6th October 2019).

Strategising a third way of managing the practical effects of majoritarian ideology

This strategic approach played a foundational role in shaping the collective response of the Muslim community in addressing the anti-Muslim sentiments of majoritarian right-wing groups in post-war Sri Lanka. Hence, this section analyses three of those initiatives: Proposals for constitutional reform, managing the ultra-nationalist monk community and a project for regulating Muslim cultural visibility.

Constitutional reform

Upon the increasing social pressure and demand for a new constitution, the Sri Lankan government decided to initiate a public debate on reforming the existing constitution. For their part, Muslim organisations also participated in the discussion by submitting four documents to the constitutional reform committee. The contents of their proposals presented an interesting case to study how Muslim organisations addressed issues pertaining to the role of Buddhism in state building. In that regard, the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, National Shoora Council, Salamah Society and

Kandy Forum submitted their suggestions to the constitution reform committee. Interestingly, out of these four proposals, none explicitly or implicitly stated that the state protection of Buddhism must be removed or challenged. Instead, all the proposals preferred to keep the status quo of the constitution regarding the majoritarian ideology intact. None of the four proposals objected to the general character of the state. In a sarcastic move, only Kandy Forum's proposals stated that the new constitution "must recognise the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual character of Sri Lanka" without demanding the removal of state patronage of Buddhism, which has been what prevents the state from accepting the equal status of all other cultural communities of the country (Thiruvangran 2016). However, all three proposals attempted to suggest clauses that have the potential to mitigate the implication of state ideology upon the minority communities. Accordingly, their proposals advocated that the new constitution should include amendments to preserve cultural visibility of minorities, to decrease prevailing inequality in terms of distribution of state resources and recruitment of employees for state institutions. These proposals, reveal the general approach of the Muslim leadership as they kept silent on the issue of state ideology while strongly stressing that the constitution should provide the required constitutional protection for minorities.

Managing the ultra-conservative monks

Secondly, the Muslim civil leadership preferred to maintain strategic connections with the ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks, who were directly involved in anti-Muslim propaganda in post-war Sri Lanka. They followed the strategic conversation mode over legally challenging them directly in the court to control their propaganda machine. Because they thought that if they challenged those monks publicly, it would create an impression that Muslims were challenging the Buddhist ideology and its leaders in the country (Respondent 22, *pers. comm.*, 7th November 2019). Alternatively, Muslim leaders switched to diplomatic and trust-building initiatives between their community and the hardcore nationalist monks on multiple fronts (Respondent 19, *pers. comm.*, 7th November 2019). This strategy provided an opportunity for the Muslim leadership to soften the ultra-nationalistic language of the fanatical monks without questioning their exclusivist Sinhala Buddhist ideology:

> We need to think of a proper strategy to fight against the ideology. The Tamils out-rightly challenged this notion and confronted the majority. This was their strategy. What we say is that it is not the proper strategy for us. What we are doing is to engage with people within the majority community in a positive manner expecting an attitude change. (Respondent 15, *pers. comm.*, 23rd October 2019)

Regulating the public culture

Thirdly, although the Muslim civil society activists did not accept the Buddhist nationalist accusation that Muslims have been making a cultural invasion of the Buddhist land, those leaders pushed Muslims to rethink the possibilities for shaping their lifestyle and cultural manifestations in line with the general norms of the Buddhist majority community. As such, one respondent appealed that "we should reform ourselves. Religion has become a burden to us. Conceptual Islam has no problem but look at practical Islam. It is an un-democratic Islam. So, we must transform ourselves. I think it will mitigate the anti-Muslim sentiments" (emphasis added) (Respondent 17, *pers. comm.*, 28th October 2019). Another respondent, echoing the same narrative, explicitly argued that:

> We are shifting to a new mode of thinking in organising our community. Before, we did not analyse the Sinhalese culture and what aspects of that culture can or cannot be adapted. Now, we are doing those sorts of exercises. Now, we are debating the extent of adaptability. (Respondent 1, *pers. comm.*, 8th October 2019)

These perspectives highlight an important point that despite the Muslim leaders' resistance to Islamophobic narratives of Buddhist ultra-nationalist groups, they think that they should not ignore the accusations altogether. Consequently, the leadership attempts to regulate the public culture of Sri Lankan Muslims to confirm the mainstream majority demands, at least to a minimum extent.

What becomes obvious from this long discussion is that the Muslim leadership strategically aims to reconcile with the state ideology and majoritarian demands to ensure their political survival. It does not outrightly challenge the constitutional as well as cultural legitimacy of the majoritarian state. However, they develop critical way-outs to prevent the negative effects of the ideology on the daily life of the community and practical grounds.

Conclusion

Firstly, the Muslim civil society organisations articulated several structured perspectives about the state ideology and its implications. The first among these is their argument that Sri Lankan majoritarian state ideology does not directly target Sri Lankan Muslims. In other words, the state ideology does not intentionally attempt to deprive Muslims of their rights. In that sense, the Sri Lankan majoritarian state ideology emerged as a response to separatist projects of armed groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. As long as the Muslim community does not

have such a political project, they do not have to react to state majoritarian ideology as radically as other separatist ideological groups did. Secondly, the Muslim activists popularise a separate narrative that the post-war ethnic tensions did not result directly from the state's majoritarian ideology. It is not a direct enemy of the Muslim community. Rather, regional geo-political developments, global political trends, and simultaneously political aspirations of local political establishments triggered the anti-Muslim violence in the post-war context. By developing such a picture, the Muslim organisations attempted to convince the Muslim community that they should be careful enough not to target the fake enemy of state ideology and instead focus on a larger picture. Despite this reconciliatory approach of the Muslim activists in dealing with the question of legitimacy and political aspirations of majoritarian ideology, the Muslim leadership holds a strong passion to resist the implication of state ideology on the daily life of the community. This stance of the leadership is clearly visible in their resistance to the Islamophobic propaganda of ultra-nationalistic groups and their initiatives.

Secondly, the overall governing framework of the Muslim civil organisations remains "realistic" not idealistic. The realistic attitude largely shapes the narratives, networks and options in a calculated manner. One aspect of such realism of their thinking is that they largely avoid approaching the issues theoretically and radically. In that sense, they believe that Muslims can win over rights through reconciliation and engagement rather than radically demanding equality and justice by confronting the majoritarian ideology. It seems that one of the foundations of such a kind of realist spirit is rooted in the demographical reality of the Muslim community. To put it differently, the Muslims are a non-territorial minority and are living in a scattered pattern. Hence, any collective action/strategy anchored on a particular fixed discourse would be beneficial to one segment of the population while it would create an adverse impact on the others, who live in a different geographical setting. This broader concern pushes the Muslim leadership to develop a highly pragmatic approach to confronting the majoritarian state structure and push off its implications on equal rights and citizenship issues. They choose to follow a middle ground and avoid challenging the state ideology directly but resist its implications.

Moving ahead, Jamal argued that minorities often think about dismantling the majoritarian elements of the regime from within by adopting certain strategies. One of the central elements of such strategies is challenging the citizenship discourses of the state and uncovering the discriminatory aspects of it. Interestingly, an analysis of discourses of the Muslim civil organisations in Sri Lanka challenges Jamal's assumptions regarding minority strategies. Jamal argued that minorities will challenge the citizenship discourses of majoritarian states. However, Muslim

leadership largely seek to manage their rights and other political questions through reconciling with the majoritarian narratives of the state. They do not prefer to dismantle the regime's majoritarian narratives even from within by challenging the citizenship narratives of the state. Hence, the case of Sri Lankan Muslim leadership helps us to develop another mode of strategy for minorities in their struggle for equality. It is that minority communities might think of reconciling with state ideology, depending on their local socio-political context and geographic demographic distribution. The findings of this research make a strong argument that Jamal's theoretical framework must be expanded to take in different strategies a minority community follows in dealing with the majoritarian state narrative and its application into account. It means that some communities might choose to challenge citizenship narratives while others might choose to reconcile with it for the convenience of their survival as displayed by the case of the Muslim civil leadership in Sri Lanka.

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