

Extremism and Islamophobia Against the Muslim Minority in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka has witnessed many examples of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence since the end of the civil war, especially in 2014 when ethnic unrest affected many. Sinhalese monks and Buddhists appear to have played an important role in the unrest. The long war and ethnonationalist ideology have resulted in a political-religious shift associated with “Buddhist extremism,” which has an association with rioting and aggression against Muslims. The purpose of this study is to investigate how the attitude of Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka towards Muslim minorities varies from time to time. This study uses the “library

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research” method where the main data includes books, journals, articles, and references related to research. Sri Lankan Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment is manifested in several dimensions: such as campaigns against halal labels on food, Muslim women’s clothing, the slaughter of livestock in Muslim religious rituals, attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses, mandatory cremation for all Sri Lankans regardless of the religion during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the closure of Islamic schools. Consequently, the government at the very least needs to enforce law and order in a fair and balanced manner for all citizens and ensure policies of multiculturalism and tolerance between religious communities are maintained.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Extremism, Muslim, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country where several ethnic, linguistic groups have lived together for centuries. But that coexistence is not always without tension, and sometimes violence. The current ethnic conflict involves the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) minority known as the Tamil Tigers, which have their roots in British colonial rule from 1815 to 1948.¹ After the civil war, militant Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Urumaya Sinhala, and Rahwana Balaya began to spread Islamophobic propaganda and engage in violence, particularly in Aluthgama and Kota Dharga, against the Muslim community that makes up about 10% of Sri Lanka’s population.²

After the civil war, anti-Muslim sentiment and violence continued to escalate in various forms, targeting the ethnic and religious aspects of Islam and Muslim livelihoods. The main anti-Muslim sentiments that have been expressed by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces include: hate speech questioning the history and ethnic origins of Muslims, destruction of places of worship and religious teaching centers, denial of halal certificates for Muslim food, restrictions on the slaughter of

animals, and criticism of Muslim cultural practices such as the wearing of the burqa and closing Islamic schools.³ Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Sri Lankan government run by extremist leaders ordered the cremation of all those who died from Covid-19 regardless of religion.

Although the impact of religious radicalism and violence by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces is clear and has received attention from local and international human rights activists and forums, the Sri Lankan government's response to controlling or stopping violence and anti-minority campaigns have been unsuccessful, particularly those directed against Muslims. In addition, there is still a large gap in terms of action taken against perpetrators of religious violence to ensure tolerance and inter-religious harmony in Sri Lanka.

History of Islamophobia in Sri Lanka

“Islamophobia” and anti-Muslim hatred are used interchangeably in Sri Lanka. Muslims in Sri Lanka make up about 10% of Sri Lanka's population, which is often maligned by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority.⁴ Incidents of violence and anti-Muslim attacks tend to vary, such as traffic accidents, harassment of those wearing the burqa, suspected food contamination, and terrorist attacks carried out by certain groups. The widespread perception is that such violence always targets Muslims.

Hatred and violence against Muslims occurred in the early twentieth century in Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon). The anti-Muslim pogroms of 1915 marked the deadliest violence to target a Muslim community spanning five provinces, and resulted in at least 25 deaths, four rapes, and attacks on more than 4,000 Muslim properties. This incident is largely forgotten in Sri Lankan history, but it is the most heartbreaking for Muslims. Sinhalese hatred of Muslims was mainly directed at Muslim shopkeepers and businessmen from India who arrived in Sri Lanka as the result of British colonial capitalism.⁵

Islamophobia was a factor in 1915 when people were killed, shops burned and mosques burned, although the riots were a symptom of the dislocation of the economy, rising prices of goods, and the political turmoil of the time. There is no denying that a politicized and popularized

Buddhist consciousness rallied the masses to identify Muslims as targets. The development of Muslim traders was, and still is, considered very detrimental to the economic growth of the people in Sinhala.⁶

Sri Lanka's largest Muslim population is known as the Moors: a term inherited from the Portuguese occupation of Sri Lanka and also used by the Dutch from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. The Moorish Muslim population at that time represented about 6.5% of Sri Lanka's Muslim population. The Moors consist of two groups: 5.7% Ceylon Moors (Ceylon Moors were Arab traders who arrived in Sri Lanka around the eighth century), and 0.8% Moorish Indians (Indian Moors were more recent immigrants from South India in the eighteenth century).

The events that sparked the 1915 pogrom involved a Buddhist ritual called the "Perahera" that traditionally took place past the site of the Castle Hill Street Mosque in Kandy. A group of Moorish Coast Muslims who were at the mosque cited a colonial law ordering musical instruments to be silenced within 100 meters of an all-faith place of worship. They claimed that the noise from the "Perahera" Buddhist procession disturbed those worshipping in the Mosque. The colonial police's decision to divert the Buddhist procession from the Castle Hill Street Mosque in Kandy sparked an inevitable outbreak of violence between Muslims and Buddhists.

By the seventh day, violence against the Moorish Muslim community had spread across 165 miles. Although the death toll is lower than that of pogroms elsewhere in Sri Lanka, the target of the violence was Muslim-owned commercial enterprises, which suggests that Sinhala Buddhist antagonism was directed primarily at symbols of Muslim livelihood and economic success. Various interpretations were offered regarding the 1915 pogrom, while the governor of Ceylon, Robert Chalmers, briefly stated that the main factors behind the violence were "economics and religion."⁷

Since the late nineteenth century, hatred of the Indian Moors, who competed with Sinhalese merchants in urban areas, had grown. In addition, the First World War had contributed to the increase in the prices of essential goods whose sales were largely controlled by Muslim traders. In this context, the Moors were thought to have taken advantage of the shortage of goods during the First World War. In addition, different

religious practices, such as the use of musical instruments by Buddhists during their processions, and the practice of silence during Muslim worship in mosques have brought Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims into conflict since the early twentieth century. Therefore, the dispute on May 29, 1915, was only a continuation of the same series of problems. However, British colonial law and order policies also contributed to friction between Sinhalese Buddhists and Moors.

In February 1915, the Supreme Court overturned a district court decision regarding the Buddhists' right to the (*perahera*) ritual to pass by the mosque on Ambagamuwa street in Gampola. During the "Perahera" of May 1915, the issue of the procession route became highly politicized. The colonial state failed to anticipate the escalation of Muslim and Buddhist tensions in May 1915 despite tensions arising from the February 1915 decision, which was seen as favoring the Muslim minority over the Sinhalese Buddhists. Indeed, the Islamophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric now embodied by the BBS is just an extension of the slander of the past.⁸ For example, several years before Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, Muslims were sometimes referred to as "barbarians" when compared to Sinhalese,⁹ and Anagarika Dharmapala, a prominent Buddhist revival leader in Sri Lanka, claimed that Muslims were "foreigners".

Rejection of Halal Certification and Logos on Food by the Bodu Bala Sena Community (BBS)

The refusal to consume halal food and the labeling of halal certifications on food has become a serious threat to Muslims in Sri Lanka after the civil war. One of the main foundations of Islam is its teaching that Muslims are only allowed to consume halal food in accordance with religious law. The All Ceylon Jamiatul Ulama (ACJU), the theological body responsible for making key decisions for Sri Lankan Muslims, was given responsibility for monitoring and issuing halal certificates, a move that caused no serious problems until BBS started its hate campaign in 2012.

Since then, hardline Sinhalese Buddhists have vehemently rejected the use of the halal logo in food and sold in shops and markets. Although marketing food as halal is a universal strategy for food producers to

attract Muslim consumers, the BBS group strongly opposes and rejects it on the grounds that it incurs additional costs for producers in Sri Lanka. As a result, propaganda against such halal logos led the ACJU to stop issuing halal logo certifications to many food-producing companies. The BBS also demanded that shops be cleared of halal meat in April 2013. This opposition to the halal logo also has economic implications for Sinhalese producers, although some producers are unwilling to incur additional costs for halal certificates for their production.¹⁰ Coupled with the anti-Islam campaign, slogans, and placards with pictures of pigs written in Arabic letters, this activity is considered to have offended and hurt Muslims in Sri Lanka. In addition, the campaign against halal certification is considered an attack on the fundamental identity of Muslims. Many Muslims in the area and elsewhere in Sri Lanka regard the protesters' actions and demonstrations as part of a wider, global Islamophobia.¹¹

As time has gone by, BBS has turned from a group into a mass movement by engaging the wider Sri Lankan population in their ultra-nationalist endeavors. In its propaganda campaigns, BBS falsely claims that it has tacit support from the government to legitimize its aims. BBS' ten-point resolutions include the abolition of halal certification and a ban on Sri Lankan women working in the Middle East and beyond.¹² BBS did not stop there. The Buddhist separatist group also objected to the slaughter of sacrificial animals, which made it difficult for Muslims to carry out their religious rituals. This is especially true during the Hajj season, during which time Muslims slaughter animals such as camels, cows, buffalo, and goats. This is not only a religious obligation, but also strengthens social solidarity among human beings through the distribution of meat to relatives, friends, and the poor.¹³

Reports claim that some Muslim youths want to avenge the actions of BBS, but the majority of Muslims do not approve of retaliation, and are praised for their patience in the face of such provocations. The main reason for not reacting to the protests stems not only from the sense of vulnerability Muslims experience in areas where Sinhalese Buddhists are the main majority, but also because it is widely believed that BBS is a very influential minority on the ground.

The rise of BBS is something that cannot be ignored. A report shows that many parts of the North-West Province of Sri Lanka have

recently become hotbeds of BBS activity, including areas such as the cities of Kuliyaipitiya, Dambadeniya, Mawathagama, Narammala, and Kurunegala. These areas have witnessed anti-Muslim protests including violence, demonstrations, and poster campaigns, the sending of threatening letters to some Muslim businesses, with some shops also being attacked at night, as well as other activities such as the carrying of placards depicting Allah as a pig and then burning it.¹⁴ BBS then expanded its anti-Muslim campaign to focus on Muslim attire. The BBS leader Ven Kirama Vimalajothy Thera stated that BBS will announce in Kandy the start of a new campaign against the long body covering worn by many Muslim women variously known as the “Abaya” or the “Burqa”.

Sinhalese Buddhist Extremists view Muslims as Enemies

The rise of extremism and violence against Muslims after the civil war is not a new development. The two major riots against Muslims that occurred before independence in 1915 were the result of economic competition between Muslim traders and Sinhalese Buddhists.¹⁵ The second was after independence. In 1973 anti-Muslim sentiment began to spread among the Sinhalese, who began to feel that Muslims were superior in education over them. Many clashes occurred between the communities. The clashes that occurred in early 1975 in Puttalam, a Muslim stronghold in the northwest of the island, constituted the worst communal violence “in which 271 Muslim families were left homeless, 44 shops were looted and burned, and 18 Muslims were shot inside a mosque by the police”.¹⁶

During the 1980s, Sinhalese Buddhist extremist groups were involved in anti-Muslim campaigns, especially in the national media. These campaigns took the form of news, articles, newspapers, and letters to the editors on issues such as the slaughter of cattle during the hajj, disturbances caused by the call to prayer, and the construction of new mosques. Following the end of Sri Lanka’s three-decade armed conflict between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the campaign of hatred toward Muslims has continued to escalate widely. The perpetrators of Islamophobic campaigns are Buddhist extremist groups such as the Sinhala Ravaya, BBS, and Mahasen Balakaya, which takes on various

forms of expression including in the mainstream media, on social media, at public gatherings, religious gatherings, and in public posters. Since then, the Muslim issue was taken to a new level by Patali Champika Ranawaka who, in his polemic text “Al-Jihad Al-Qaeda,” placed Muslims in Sri Lanka within the context of the global discourse of Muslim political radicalization. The author not only hinted at the emergence of alleged “Muslim extremism” in Sri Lanka, but also the radicalization of Muslim politics, and linked it to the armed Tamil separatist movement led by the LTTE.¹⁷

It should be noted that incidents between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims occur frequently. On September 9, 2011, a Muslim temple, which had stood for 300 years in Anuradhapura, was demolished by a mob led by monks. Although police were present at the site, they did not interfere. Then on 20 April 2012, at a mosque named Kairiya Jummah in Dambulla, an area that many Buddhists consider a Buddhist holy city located in Matale District, Sri Lanka, about 2000 Buddhists including monks marched towards the mosque and started demonstrating to demand the demolition of the mosque. Shortly after the demonstration, firebombs targeted the mosque, worshipers were evacuated, and Friday prayers were canceled. TV footage showed that monks were involved in the violence, and two days after the mass demonstration in Dambulla, a monk took off his robes and displayed himself in front of the mosque.¹⁸

Following the Dambulla Mosque attack, there were also attacks and anti-Muslim demonstrations against the construction of a mosque and an attack on a madrasa in Dehiwala in May 2012, along with the Jummah Mosque arson incident in Unnichai village in August 2012, which caused some damage to the loudspeakers and the sound system at the Mohideen Jumma Kohilawatte Mosque in Wellampitiya. In August 2012 in Colombo there was also a fire inside the Thakkiya Mosque on the Malwathu Malwathu Oya Line, Sinha Kanuwa, Anuradhapura.¹⁹

Among the tragedies reported in 2013, the worst were the demolition of the walls of the Meera Makkam Mosque in Kandy in the early hours of the morning, the forced closure of the Masjid (Masjithul Araba) in Mahiyangana after pigs and stones were thrown into the mosque during Friday prayers on 18 July 2013 (during the month of holy Ramadan), and the attack on the Grandpass Mosque in August 2013. Following these

incidents, anti-Muslim sentiment and violence received international attention, including from the United Nations (UN), who opposed and criticized Sri Lanka for violating the rights of religious minorities.

The United States Department of State, Human Rights, and the United States Bureau of Democracy prepared and released a report on International Religious Freedom for 2013. The report included a 2013 sample of religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka. The report said there were reports of harassment and social discrimination based on religious beliefs, that hardline Buddhist groups had attacked churches and mosques. The report also said that the constitution and policies and laws included provisions to protect religious freedom in Sri Lanka. In practice, however, local authorities have failed to take action against communal violence, including attacks on religious minorities such as Muslims, and perpetrators have gone unpunished.²⁰

Anti-Muslim sentiment and acts of violence occurred in major incidents in Sri Lanka in June 2014, November 2017, February 2018, and March 2018.²¹ The ongoing campaign against minorities, especially Muslims, eventually erupted into communal riots on 12 June 2014 around Poson Poya (a celebration of the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka). An Alabama Samitha monk and his driver were confronted by a group of Muslims in Dharga City, responding to the incident. Then, the Aluthgama Police were surrounded by monks and their supporters demanding immediate action. Three Muslims were detained until June 25, 2014.²²

There was then an eruption of violence in ethnic riots targeting Muslims, worse than the anti-minority hate incidents that occurred a few years earlier. The main areas affected were Aluthgama, Beruwala, and Dharga Town in Kalutara District on the Southwest island, on opposite ends of the country from the civil war areas in the North and East. About 10,000 people were displaced by the riots, 80% of them were Muslim. Four people were killed, 80 others were injured, and a large number of homes and businesses were destroyed. The violence attracted international attention, partly because of the prevalence of Islamophobia as in Myanmar, and partly because of widespread incitement by Buddhist monks. For years, hardline Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka were notorious

for attacking religious peace demonstrations, demonstrations of opposition political parties, and religious minorities.²³

While the anti-Muslim campaign is led by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces, there is strong criticism of the ineffectiveness of government actors in failing to control the violence. Politicians (and administrators also) directly and indirectly support these extreme Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces. For example, In March 2013, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, who was secretary of the then defense ministry, signaled his open support for BBS by attending the opening ceremony of its Buddhist leadership academy. In his remarks, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said that he decided to attend the event after realizing its importance. According to him, Buddhist religious leaders who carry out this important national task need not be feared or doubted by anyone.

It is noteworthy that with the change of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's regime in early 2015, anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiment and violence have diminished. This clearly shows the close relationship between the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa regime and the ineffectiveness of the state in overcoming violence and anti-religious minority campaigns.²⁴

There is an argument to be made that the case of Sinhalese Buddhist sentiment towards Muslims in Sri Lanka is part of a wider trend in anti-Muslim sentiment that has developed in many other countries in recent years, especially toward those who live as minorities and face serious challenges in practicing their religion and culture. India's version of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence, for example, is motivated by the power of Hindu nationalism aimed at consolidating a stronger Hindu community. Even in the case in Myanmar, most of the Rohingya Muslims are marginalized citizens, who demand recognition of their citizenship status from the Myanmar government, and an improvement of their role in the socio-economic and political fields, which is also limited.²⁵

The 2019 Easter Sunday Bombing

On April 21, 2019, the Easter Sunday suicide bombings occurred at three churches on the outskirts of the capital Colombo. Four large hotels in the city center were also hit by suicide bombings that killed at least

259 people, including 45 foreign nationals, and injured hundreds more. Two other bombs were detonated hours later as bomb disposal squads attempted to defuse them. Nine suicide bombers, including a woman, have been identified via CCTV footage, and one of the bombers was reportedly educated in the UK. They blew themselves up in three overcrowded churches and four hotels, and a hospital in the capital Colombo was also targeted. In a national hunt, numerous explosive devices were found and in the largest haul 83 explosive devices were unearthed near a bus station in Colombo.²⁶

The bombing was the first large-scale terrorist attack since the end of the civil war 10 years earlier.²⁷ After the bombings, the Sri Lankan government immediately blocked access to all social media networks and messaging services to reduce the spread of misinformation or calls for retaliation, but this also impeded the government's ability to locate the victims' family members.

The Islamic State group (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the BBC. The report said that ISIS had targeted "members of the US-led coalition and Christians in Sri Lanka."²⁸ Although Muslims in Sri Lanka are aware of ISIS ideology and its political mobilization in the Middle East, there are no clear signs of ISIS military mobilization in Sri Lanka. One reason why Sri Lanka was singled out by ISIS is the growing Islamophobia and marginalization felt by Muslims in Sri Lanka as the result of Sinhalese Buddhist anti-Muslim attacks. ISIS has been able to attract Muslims around the world for its global campaign so that it turned into a transnational Islamic movement. It turns out that several suicide bombers could have traveled to ISIS strongholds in the Middle East, but although none have done so, the anti-Muslim sentiment that has continued to surge in Sri Lanka since 2012 is arguably enough to radicalize Sri Lankan Muslims.

Sri Lankan authorities remain unconvinced of the group's involvement even though ISIS has claimed responsibility, and authorities are investigating whether foreign militants advised, funded, or mentored the local bombers. Sri Lankan authorities have blamed a local extremist group: the National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ), whose leader (alternately Mohammed Zahran or Zahran Hashmi), became known to Muslim

leaders three years ago for his impassioned speeches online. The eight bombers were local Sri Lankan Muslims, including the 34-year-old NTJ leader Mohamed Zahran who “was one of the two suicide bombers who blew themselves up at the Shangri-La hotel.”

On 23 April 2019, politician Ruwan Wijewardene stated that the government viewed the bombing as retaliation for the March 2019 massacre of Muslims at the Christchurch Mosque, New Zealand. However, this statement was refuted, given that the Easter Sunday bombings were clearly planned long before the massacre of Muslims in Christchurch and there was no concrete evidence. Then, on 26 April 2019, the Sri Lankan Army and the Special Task Force, a police paramilitary unit that specializes in counter-terrorism, carried out a search operation in Sainthamaruthu, a city on the east coast. There, there were three explosions, and a gun battle broke out as security forces stormed the Jihadi headquarters. Three suicide bombers blew themselves up, killing at least nine family members, six of them children, and three other Islamist militants were shot dead by security forces.²⁹

The Sri Lankan government was praised for its handling of post-bombing tensions, as they avoided mass killings and reprisals. A small number of violent revenge attacks took place, but these were isolated and apparently uncoordinated. The main immediate response was an outpouring of shock and sadness at the national level. In a positive development, the post-bomb political environment was marked by calls for peace from senior government leaders, and though there were a few isolated retaliatory attacks against Muslims, there was no ethnic unrest on previous scales. This could be an indication of how much influence the government has on the potential to inflame ethnic-religious violence. Indeed, nearly a year and eight months later, the truth is starting to come out showing that the Muslim community had nothing to do with the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019.

The Prohibition of Wearing the Burqa

Most of the countries that have so far banned the burqa are from continental Europe.³⁰ In Russia, the hijab has been banned in schools and universities in two regions, namely the Stavropol region in 2013 and the

Republic of Mordovia in 2014, both of which have been upheld by the Russian Supreme Court. Several regions in Spain, including Barcelona, had also imposed a form of the burqa ban in 2010, but this was overturned by Spain's Supreme Court in 2013. A burqa ban was also implemented in Italy in the regions of Lombardy in 2015 and Liguria in 2017. Ticino was the first Swiss canton to approve a total burqa ban in 2013.³¹

As of March 13, 2021, Sri Lanka has taken significant steps to ban the burqa and other face coverings in public places, citing national security. Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara told the BBC that he had signed a cabinet order which now needed approval from parliament. Officials said they hoped the ban would be issued soon and fully implemented. All of this was done on the grounds of national security. The move comes nearly two years after the 2019 Easter Sunday hotel and church bombings. Suicide bombers targeted a Catholic church and a hotel frequented by foreign tourists that killed more than 250 people in April 2019.

Now, the government is trying to impose the ban permanently. Sarath Weerasekara told reporters that, "In the past, Sri Lankan Muslim women and girls never wore the burqa. It is a sign of the religious extremism that is emerging today, so the permanent ban should be fully implemented, so I have signed it and the regulation will be implemented immediately."

This prohibition violates Sri Lankan Muslims' right to freedom of expression, belief, and religion. Many Sri Lankans have expressed disapproval and concern over the move, with some claiming it is a way to please the Buddhist majority and will create lasting divisions among the religious communities.³² Furthermore, it can lead to greater marginalization and create rifts between some Muslim groups and society at large.³³

Some have argued that the ban hints at the underlying undertones of racism, Islamophobia, and an inability to understand other cultures. For some Muslim women wearing the burqa is an integral part of one's faith, as it is a means to be closer to the Prophet. When someone wearing a burqa is harassed, the onus is on the perpetrator, not the victim.

Responses from various quarters emerged about the burqa ban in Sri Lanka, one of which was from Pakistan's Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Saad Khattak, writing that the ban would only hurt the feelings of Sri Lankan Muslims and those around the world. The UN special rapporteur

on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, wrote that “the ban on the burqa is incompatible with international legal guarantees of the right to manifest one’s religion or belief & freedom of expression.”³⁴ From Indonesia, the Deputy Chair of the Indonesian Ulema Council, Anwar Abbas said the burqa ban in Sri Lanka was “offensive to Muslims around the world.” According to Anwar Abbas, it would be unfair if the Sri Lankan state banned the burqa just because of incidents involving a few people. Abbas cited the Sri Lankan government’s stance as one of the “radical and terrorist acts committed by the state against Muslims in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Muslims in Indonesia urge the Sri Lankan government to respect the rights of Muslims to practice their religion.”³⁵

Meanwhile, the Social Justice Party asked the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to intervene to resolve the situation. Sri Lankan government authorities also plan to close 1,000 Islamic schools on the grounds of national security. PKS, through the chairman of the Central Executive Board Bukhari Yusuf stated: “The Indonesian government, as the largest country in ASEAN, should take steps to eliminate colonialism and injustice wherever it is.” Bukhari asked the Sri Lankan government to immediately stop the plan. This is because the ban on the burqa and the closure of Islamic schools are considered discriminatory actions against Muslims. Bukhari believes that the use of the burqa cannot be associated with extremism or terrorism.

Closure of 1000 Muslim Schools

Sarath Weerasekara also said the Sri Lankan government plans to ban more than 1,000 Islamic schools, which he said violated the national education policy: “no one can open schools and teach children whatever you want. Schools must comply with educational policies that have been set by the government. Most schools that are not registered under the government’s policy only teach Arabic and the Koran, so that’s bad.”

The government also wants to close about 1,000 madrasas that are not registered with the government. Students enrolled in madrasas generally come from poor and economically marginalized families and struggle to obtain secondary education qualifications. Muslim students from low-income

families living in rented houses, especially in urban areas, and are often rejected from public schools due to intense competition. In Colombo alone, nearly 5000 children fail to attend public schools. Muslim students' access to public and private schools in order to continue their secondary education is significantly lower than that of their non-Muslim counterparts due to socio-economic and cultural reasons since Sri Lanka's independence.

Private madrasas have targeted economically weak students from Muslim societies where many children have few options for receiving education. Many Muslim children drop out of school because they cannot afford the expensive tuition fees. Since economically vulnerable Muslim children are being targeted by madrasa schools, the Sri Lankan government needs to appoint Muslim scholars and fund them to regulate the curriculum in educational activities. The country has a responsibility to regulate religious schools including madrasas. Educational assistance from foreign countries should be carefully monitored by the state, but not necessarily limited. The religious school syllabus must be prepared by a community-approved cleric who has a deep understanding of religious and secular education.³⁶

Hilmi Ahmed, who is president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, told the BBC that if officials had problems identifying a person wearing a burqa "the person wearing the burqa will not have a face covering for identity checking purposes." However, he also said that everyone has the right to the freedom to wear a face-covering regardless of their faith. This perspective needs to be understood from a human rights point of view, and not only from a religious or cultural point of view. Regarding the issue of madrasas, Ahmed said most Muslim schools are registered with the government, "maybe there are about 5% that have not complied and of course that can be handled."³⁷

Covid-19 and Negative Stigmatization of Muslim Minorities

Before the onset of the pandemic, Muslims had been the target of Islamophobia in the mass media by Sinhalese Buddhists. The Covid-19 pandemic sparked stigmatization and panic that impacted several categories of society in Sri Lanka. Electronic media, and social media in

particular, play a very important role in the stigmatization process, and government officials are also involved in stigmatization. Two popular Sinhala private TV channels tend to target Muslims as the mastermind behind the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak.³⁸

The Sri Lankan government has taken several steps in its fight against Covid-19 that have harmed or stigmatized its Muslim minority. This is a continuation of the majority policy which has recently shifted from a focus on ethnicity to religion.³⁹ In response to Covid-19, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, declared a red signal and a state of emergency, which made many people worried about their rights as citizens. The appointment and delivery of the message from the government were less than encouraging regarding the rights of minorities in Sri Lanka, notably Muslims. For example, the government's response to Covid-19 has recently made a statement suggesting that Covid-19 has always been associated with Sri Lankan Muslims.

Many Covid-19 conspiracies and restrictions are disproportionately directed against Muslims. Examples include:

- 1 Human rights groups are concerned that the government issued an order on 1 April 2020 to arrest those who criticize officials or spread what they perceive as fake news about the pandemic, which impacts Muslims and other minorities.
- 2 The existence of anti-Muslim propaganda that attacks ethnic minority communities who are not responsible for their behavior during the pandemic, as well as allegations of the organized spread of Covid-19.
- 3 Attacks on Muslim websites have not been stopped by government security forces and have continued during Covid-19.
- 4 Two Muslim figures who have spoken out against anti-Muslim discrimination to the government have been detained without due process.⁴⁰

Regarding the role played by the mainstream media in spreading hate across Sri Lanka, the BBC reports: "Since the death of the first Sri Lankan Muslim from Covid-19 on 31 March 2020, some media in Sri Lanka have publicly blamed the ethnic Muslim community for spreading the epidemic Covid-19 disease, although only 11 deaths have been officially recorded in the country."

One incident was on TV channel B that, in its news broadcast, showed a large gathering at a mosque, which reportedly violated the ban on public gatherings at the time. The news was then shared on a Facebook group of more than 70,000 people as an anti-social activity that was carried out by the Muslim group in question. Then the news was disseminated further to create a narrative that Muslims were the mastermind behind the spread of Covid-19 in Sri Lanka. However, subsequent investigations revealing that Muslims were behind the spread of Covid-19 were shown to be a lie and the meeting at the mosque had been approved by the health authorities in the area.⁴¹

In another social media post, a middle-aged Muslim from the city of Akurana claimed that he brought Covid-19 from India. He then says he went to get supplies and spread the Covid-19 outbreak further in the cities of Kurunagala, Gampola, and Galagedera, which he also visited. He states his travels from India to cities in Sri Lanka was a deliberate move to spread Covid-19 in Sri Lanka. These anecdotal examples illustrate a general trend of mass media and social media in Sri Lanka targeting the Muslim community in their coverage of Covid-19. Media reports of this kind have no factual basis. The Covid-19 pandemic has furthered the spread of stigmatization and deepened inequality in relation to ethnicity, religion, and class. The ongoing pandemic in Sri Lanka has also given rise to a pandemic of fear and stigmatization resulting in several social problems and public health crises especially among Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Cremation for Muslims who died due to Covid-19

Nihal Abeysinghe, Senior Virologist and Government Epidemiologist explained that coronavirus bodies can be buried or cremated. He said there was no question of germs spreading through the water in graves and causing harm to human health. The advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) has been followed by countries around the world. However, Sri Lanka rejected the WHO's advice and insisted on cremating Muslims who died of Covid-19. Notably, Professor Tissa Vitarana said that there were no virologists in the committee formed to deal with this issue.

Even India, a country currently governed by leaders who are generally hostile to Muslim minorities, has allowed burials for minorities. For Muslims around the world, burying their dead is a religious obligation and Islamic tradition has dictated how it should be done. For every Muslim death is the end of life in this world and the beginning of life in the hereafter. Until now the Muslims who died of Covid-19 were forcibly cremated by the Sri Lankan government, and no one else dared to comment on it. There is also a report circulating that many people who died naturally were also forced to be cremated.

In other countries there has been strong criticism of the Covid-19 cremation of corpses, and Muslims claim that this policy has nothing to do with health or medical reasons, but was only to insult and provoke Muslims. This was taken up in Parliament by Muslim and non-Muslim members and both asked President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the government to change this policy, though there was no response from the government.

The Muslim and Christian communities are grateful for the outpouring of support they have received from various religious leaders, medical personnel, and civil society activists, but the government remains firm in its decision not to bury the bodies infected with Covid-19. One last hope in accessing this basic right to bury the dead is the Supreme Court. After the mandatory cremation policy was introduced, Muslim leaders, civil society groups, and some Muslim families who were cremated petitioned the Supreme Court.⁴²

The team, led by former DPR member Ali Zahir Moulana, took the case to the Supreme Court and it was rejected without clear reasons. We as citizens do not know why the Supreme Court rejects petitions from minorities. We do not know whether the petitioners have violated the rules of the Constitutional Court when applying. In the midst of all this came the shocking fact of a 20-day old baby who was admitted to the hospital at 10.45 am on 7 December 2020. The baby died at 16:15 the next day on 8 December 2020 and was cremated at 4 pm, then on December 9, 2020, the hospital failed to notify the parents when the baby died, who were only notified of his death when the parents contacted the hospital. The father of the dead baby desperately wanted to do a PCR test at a private hospital, but the hospital staff refused and forced his father to sign

a waiver to allow the cremation. Then they were told to go to Borella's cemetery to cremate the baby without their consent. When the father asked why he was in such a hurry to cremate the baby's body, while several other bodies were waiting to be cremated and there was no answer from the doctor and others. "I couldn't say anything and the doctors and other people didn't even bother to answer my questions but all went out to cremate the baby without any sense of human conscience," the baby's father said in a video interview.⁴³

In another video circulating on Wednesday, December 16, 2020, a Sri Lankan Muslim complained that his wife had died at Kalubowila Hospital and was not allowed to see the body and not allowed to do a PCR test in person. They were forced to allow a cremation. Meanwhile, the cremation of the 20-day-old baby received wide attention around the world. Sri Lankan Muslims living in European countries staged demonstrations in front of the Sri Lankan High Commission in London to protest the cremation of Muslims who have died during the pandemic.

At first glance, the Sri Lankan government insists that the bodies of all Covid-19 victims should be cremated, regardless of religion, which may seem reasonable. However, upon further examination, it is clear that the decision to impose cremation on Muslims is against WHO guidelines. Dr. Channa Perera, Consultant Forensic Pathology with Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health, told the BBC World Service: "The government is not against Muslims, but they have a bit of fear about whether the virus can be used for illegal activities. Maybe unwanted people can gain access to the body and it can be used as a biological weapon." Later, the opposition leader in Sri Lanka, Sajith Premadasa, also stated that "the act of racism being perpetrated against our Muslim brothers and sisters is disgusting and must be faced by everyone."⁴⁴

The amendment to the Gazette for cremation in Sri Lanka read as follows:

61A. Burial of the Bodies of People Who Have Died Due to Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)

- 1 Regardless of the provisions of regulations 61A the bodies of people who have died or are suspected to have died, due to Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) will be cremated.

- 2 at a temperature of 800 to 1200 degrees Celsius for a period of at least forty-five minutes to one hour for complete combustion, to prevent potential biological threats; and
- 3 at a cemetery or a place approved by the competent authority under the supervision of that authority, following the instructions issued by the Director-General of Health Services.
- 4 No one may hand over the body of a person who has died or is suspected of having died due to Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) to anyone except for the person who takes the necessary action. cremation officer, nominated by the appropriate authority.
- 5 Clothing and personal protective equipment that cannot be reused by people who handle corpses at the cemetery or such place must be burned by placing them with the coffin at the time of cremation.

The new regulation was quickly incorporated into the Minister of Health Regulation's "Provisional Guidelines for Clinical Practice in Suspected and Confirmed Covid-19 Patients"; this was the introduction of a controversial mandatory cremation policy that is still in effect today. The Notice Sheet above was issued on April 11, 2020.

Negative publicity from Sri Lanka has reached the African continent. Are extremists, who think the world is part of Sri Lanka and not Sri Lanka is part of the world, realize the devastating impact of this negative publicity on Sri Lanka? After the end of the civil war, the Sri Lankan government severed ties with Muslim countries and forged close ties with anti-Muslim countries such as the United States, Israel, India, and China who allegedly implemented their criminal agendas against Muslims. The Sri Lankan agenda with them is to promote hatred against Muslims and divide Sri Lankan Muslim society.

Conclusion

Prior to Sri Lanka's independence there several interreligious dynamics that fostered Islamophobia among particular groups from the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, including those among the government. The suicide bombings on Easter Sunday at the three churches on the outskirts of

Colombo spread a deeply negative image of Islam in Sri Lanka among the Sinhala Buddhist community. These attacks also prompted the government to ban the wearing of the burqa for Muslim women, as this form of dress was worn by those involved in the terrorism incidents. Government repression of Muslims after the attacks culminated in the closure of 1,000 madrasas.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Muslims have been increasingly marginalized in Sri Lanka due to government policies that are Islamophobic, most notably the requirement that those who die from coronavirus must be cremated regardless of their religion. In addition, electronic media and social media also play a very prominent role in the process of stigmatizing Muslims by, for example, Muslims as the mastermind behind the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak.

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