

Religious Symbolism and Politics in Sri Lanka: Muslim's Grievances

M.A.M.Fowsar

Lecturer (Prob.) in Political Science, Department of Social Sciences, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka,
fowsar2009@gmail.com

Introduction

Sri Lanka, a small island in the Indian Ocean is situated at the foot of the South Asian subcontinent and it is a home for plural society. The civil war in Sri Lanka, which came to an end with the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 amid large civilian casualties, has been opened new window for ethnic cohesion in Sri Lanka. All major ethnic groups, the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims have been victims of the ethnic violence. The ethnocratic based religious politics is visualized in terms of the ways in which the dynamic of the politics has been embedded into religious extremism in post-war situation.

After a brief historical note on politicisation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the paper aims to analysis the present plight of Muslim community in Sri Lanka and attempt to highlight the major issues faced by Lankan Muslims in present scenario. It further explores the causes behind the growing hate-Muslim campaigns and continuing attacks on worship places and business establishments of the community.

Keywords: *Religious Symbolism, Religious based Politics, Ethnocracy*

Methodology

This study has been carried out mainly through a qualitative research by using secondary materials.

Results and Discussion

Sri Lanka: home of plural society?

Sri Lanka is diverse in social composition, the heterogeneity being reflected in the varied ethnic groups, religious faiths, and languages spoken on the island. Sri Lanka's religious and ethnic diversity echoes the multiracial and pluralistic character of Sri Lankan society. However, contemporary political developments coupled with the emergence of extremist religious

forces have radically changed the harmony of this plural society (*Imtiyaz 2010*).

Seventy per cent of the Sinhalese are associated with (the Theravada school of) Buddhism (70.2). Hinduism (12.6), the second largest religion in Sri Lanka, is predominantly the faith of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Muslims (9.7) in Sri Lanka are largely divided into three major groups: the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Muslims, and the Malays. The Christians who comprise 6.1 per cent of the population constitute the fourth main religious group in Sri Lanka (*Department of Census and Statistics 2008*).

The Sinhala-Buddhist Religio - Political Parties and Groups

Buddhist monks have enjoyed a prominent position with the society for long time. The state policies were being eschewed towards Buddhism from the early days of independent. Political parties solely based on religious identity are a relative new phenomenon. Three major political parties can be exclusively categorized as political parties that employ Sinhala-Buddhist concerns and demands for electoral gains: Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (JNP) (*Imtiyaz 2010*). Presently, both Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya (SR) are viewed as main ethno-religious forces who are trying to disturb the peace and tranquillity of the country.

These groups share common goals: to uphold Buddhism and establish a link between the state and religion; to advocate a violent solution to the Tamil question and; to oppose all form of devolution to the minorities. The emotional symbolic agendas of the JHU, JNP, BBS and SR are the biggest hurdle for the government of Sri Lanka to seek meaningful political initiatives to reform the state.

Religious Symbolism in Politics

Elite mobilization manipulating symbols has been a major trend in the politics of Sri Lanka since independence. The emotional linguistic nationalism, the extremist Buddhist religious rhetoric, remembering ancient Buddhist heroes and generating fears are the key electoral instruments of the main Sinhala political parties in the island to win the Sinhalese vote (*Imtiyaz 2010*). All elections in Sri Lanka, between 1948 (parliamentary election) and 2010 (presidential election), have made use of religio-ethnic symbols. However, symbolic slogans were not clearly associated with the agendas of politicians to win the very first general elections.

The symbolic politics based on ethnic outbidding first appeared in the early 1950's with the formation of the SLFP. The SLFP customarily relied upon the socially and politically influential groups including the Buddhist clergy or bhikkus, the Sangha to carry its message to the Sinhalese villages. The election results sent the message that Bandaranayke's religio-ethnic symbolic policies had swayed the Sinhalese, particularly the rural voters (*Jayasuriya 2005*).

The growth of Sinhala-Buddhist extremism helped weaken the secular structure of Sri Lanka state. In 1966, Bhikkhus opposed concessions to the minority Tamils. In 1970, the SLFP formed a "no-contest" electoral alliance with traditional pro-Sinhalese left parties to defeat the UNP (*Imtiyaz 2010*). Chapter II of the 1972 Constitution provided the foremost place to Buddhism and second Republic was also to retain the same status for Buddhism.

The growth of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka significantly increased the influence of Sinhala-Buddhist extremists and Bhikkhus in the Sri Lankan polity. The movement for the Sinhalization of the island run by extremist Sinhala forces won state legitimacy in July 1983. However, Buddhist attacks on other religious group were given second priority compare with civil war. ***Sinhala-***

Buddhasization in New Decades

In 1994s, President Kumaratunga, who subscribed to the ideas of European Style secularism, made an alliance with the JVP, Sinhala ultra-nationalists party and formed the United People's Alliance. Nevertheless, politicization of Buddhism was one of the key agendas of the ruling UPFA and to win the Southern Sinhalese vote (*Imtiyaz 2010*).

Rajapaksa sought to praise Buddhist history, promised war on the LTTE, blamed the West particularly. As Jehan Perera (2013) said, with end of the war, the country has begun to witness a few disgruntled Buddhist monks taking Buddhism as a weapon for power and glory. In fact, the politicization of Buddhism is, incontrovertibly, the main agenda of the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists. It is turned against Muslim minority who constituted second largest ethnic minority in Sri Lanka.

Muslim's Grievances

Muslims in the island have been the most peaceful community. According to former Chief Justice Sarath N.Silva (2008), "A salient feature of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and their organizations is that they never organized themselves for armed insurrection or destruction. They are a peaceful ethnic group spread throughout the length and breadth of country. They interact with other religious and ethnic groups cordially interlinking those cultures with their own culture while polarizing their own culture. This is applicable."

However, there is a rapid increase in anti-Muslim sentiments amongst sections of the political class in Sri Lankan society in the recent past. They have started raising issues such as halal food, attacks on mosques and shrines, Muslim women's dress code, slaughtering animals, attacks on Muslim owned business establishments, questions on increasing population and dispute over admissions to the Law College.

The finding of the study revealed that following factors are behind the growing anti-Muslim sentiments; the country entered into new era – it could be simply called as no war era, Islamic revitalization happening in the world, fear of Islam, Islamic faith – not accommodate other religious norms into Islamic faith, prosperity of Lankan Muslims, Muslims habit of expanding for the mosques, promoting Buddhist nationalistic ideology and external supports from the Jews and other western counterparts.

Here is arising a question that why Muslims and Islam has been targeted. The "sons of the soil" is core element of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. It was developed for religious and political purposes. This sentiment did not fully accommodate other religious groups into the socio-economic and political mainstream of the state. As a non-Sinhala Buddhist minority, Muslims are viewed as "alien" and "Shylockian".

Historically, inflammatory writing in publications Dharmapala's Sinhala Bauddhaya and Piyadasa Sirisena's Sinhala Jathiya fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments in the island and is believed to have culminated in the anti-Muslim riots and he hailed the anti-Muslim violence. "The peaceful Sinhalese have at last shown that they can no longer bear the insult of the alien," he wrote. "The whole nation in one day has raised against the Moor (Muslims) people."

Unfortunately, the Muslim community could not counter these allegations due to the following reasons. Muslim political movements and civil society were weakened in Sri Lankan polity. At present, they have only voice and demonstration against those allegations. The community has forgotten politicians and forgotten people and it became a nature in Muslim polity. Some politicians praised the government measures although it neglects Muslim problems.

In fact, the end of the civil war brought hopes that the country could become united. But attacks by radical Buddhists on Muslims suggest Sri Lanka faces a new challenge to internal harmony. The politicisation of Buddhism as the state religion and the intervening influence it has in politics and social affairs continues to threaten non-Buddhist minorities and hinder peaceful coexistence of all communities. In the post war context, this is of the utmost importance for reconciliation and peaceful co-existence, but it is a 'melting pot'.

The state is also justifying its nature as ethnocentric based religious state since its failure as a responsible entity in the center to prevent all attacks on places of worship; failure to take measure to ensure that all religions are accorded with the same treatment. It is turning a blind eye by the government to yield to extremist forces, which is a part of the government now, to carry out its ideologies and the promises were provided, but reality is quietly different.

The recent trend of the state is towards Sinhalese ethnocentricity from multi-ethnic democracy as reasons of war ended, the state gradually turned towards a Sinhalese strategy, the emergence of ethnocentricity and the inherent tensions between formal democratic procedures and a parallel state project of ethnicizing contested spaces and political institutions.

Conclusion

Buddhist extremism has been on the rise in Post-war Sri Lanka and the way that Sri Lankan Muslims react in politically difficult times such as these will determine how they are perceived in the future. Sinhalese radical movements and portion of ruling elites are claim that some Muslim Mosque areas belongs to their secret land under the constitutional act. The recent anti Muslim campaigns in many part of the Island by protests over Mosques and Dharhas of historical importance has created a kind of fear psychosis and uncertainty among the Muslims of this Island nation. Certain section of the media and alien intelligence reports that there is a possibility of Islamic Jihad, Al-Qaida or Thaliban.

Hence, Sri Lanka's post-war situation can be described as a missing opportunity for sustainable peace and accommodate Muslim minorities into the state system. However, this is the high time for religious and community leaders to initiate inter-faith dialogue at all possible levels to ensure that the people of all religions are equipped with an objective understanding of all the religions in Sri Lanka. There should be taken wide variety of measures to build ethnic harmony in post-war Sri Lanka. State system should be returned ethnocentric to secular state.

References

1. Ananda Wickeremeratne. 1995. *Buddhism and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: A Historical Analysis*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.
2. Asia Foundation. 2011. *New Survey in Post-War Sri Lanka Examines Ethno-Religious Relationships*. Retrieved from <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2012/07/11/new-survey-in-post-war-sri-lanka-examines-ethno-religious-relationships/>
3. Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka, 2008. *Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*, Sri Lanka: Department of Census and Statistics.
4. Dharmadasa. K.N.O. 1992. *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: the Growth of Sinhalese Nationalism in Sri Lanka*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
5. Farook, Latheef. 2013. *The Growing hate-Muslim Campaign! Could turn the country into a killing field*. Retrieved from <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2013/01/06/growing-hate-muslim-campaign-could-turn-the-country-into-a-killing-field/>
6. Høglund, K., and Orjuela. 2012. *Hybrid Peace Governance and Illiberal Peacebuilding in Sri*

- Lanka. Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations: January-March 2012, Vol. 18, No. 1.
7. Imtiyaz, A. R. M. 2010. *Politicization of Buddhism and Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka*, In Ali Riaz, 2010. Religion and Politics in South Asia. London: Routledge.
 8. Jayasuriya, Laksiri. 2005. *The Changing Face of Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka: 1994-2004*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International.
 9. Kumari Jayewardene, *Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Some Aspects of Sinhala Buddhist Consciousness over the past 100 years*. Colombo, Dehiwala.: Center for Social Analysis. 1985.
 10. Perera, Jehan. 2013. *Improved Governance Necessary to Address Anti-Minority Sentiment*. Retrieved from http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=69411
 11. Tambiah. S.J. 1992. *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.