

Muslim Ethnopolitics in the Nation-Building Process of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, which experienced centuries-long colonization of Portuguese, the Netherlands, and Britain respectively, declared its independence on 4 February 1948. After its independence, Sri Lanka set out nationalist impulses in order to remove the traumatic effects of its colonial past. However, the effects of the colonial past deviated those nationalistic implementations and targeted other elements in the territory. One of the most important of these nationalist implementations is the replacement of English with Sinhala as the only official language in 1956 by “the Sinhala Only Act”. However, the act received criticisms from Tamils. An amendment made in 1958 by virtue of the compromise between Tamil and Sinhala leaders and caused relative changes under the discourse of “Sinhala only Tamil also”. But this did not hinder the decline in the number of Tamil speaking people in official places because of insufficient proficiency in Sinhala language. The amendment in the constitution in 1978 made Tamil the other official language. But, in the following years, the state’s Sinhalese-oriented policies continued and resulted in the emergence of Tamil nationalism, which then evolved into an armed struggle towards the end of the 1980’s. This process negatively affected the Muslims at large who were trying to maintain their existence by remaining neutral until today. Muslims’ approach to side with one of the two sides was very sensitive and careful. They preferred to express their problems and demands in a political platform.

Nearly two million Muslims live in Sri Lanka whose total population amounts to 22 million. The Muslims mainly concentrated in the regions of Ampara, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa in the eastern part of the country. Colombo is the capital city with a considerable Muslim population. While the majority of Muslims speak Tamil language, they don’t identify themselves as “Tamils” or with any other ethnicity. Even though they are trilingual, they don’t attribute more value to any of these three languages. It is “the uniqueness of Muslim community” in Sri Lanka that they identify themselves only as Muslims rather than any other identifications based on linguistics or ethnicity.[1]

As of the independence process of Sri Lanka, with the implementation of Sinhala-oriented policies, the ideology of Tamil nationality came out and demanded independence for all Tamil speaking people including the Muslims. Until the 1980’s Tamil and Muslim communities who speak the same language, lived in coexistence and did not occur any violent clashes between them. However, the Muslims did not support the idea of Tamil nationalism since their understanding of identity doesn’t depend on ethnicity. But they could not escape from the clashes between Tamil and Sinhala nationalism and became the target of both. The tactical alliances of Muslims with the state in the north and east provided protection to a certain extent for Muslims, but this time they became the target of the Tamil militants.

In 1985, Tamil militants in the north east of the country launched lethal attacks on Muslims. On August 1990, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam/LTTE fighters attacked two mosques in Kattandukky. More than one hundred Sri Lankan Muslims lost their lives in these attacks. On 30 October 1990, LTTE forced 28.000 Muslims to leave Jaffna within two hours. About 95.000 Muslims were dismissed from the northern territories where they lived and became IDPs. Muslims had constituted 5% of the northern part of the country until the clashes and attacks took place and forcibly had been driven out by LTTE by 1990.

As previously mentioned, Muslims who constitute nearly 10% of the total population in Sri Lanka are scattered all over Sri Lanka, although they are highly concentrated in eastern parts. Therefore, they have been an important element in electoral constituencies for a long time and taken part in the national majority parties of Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP). Thus, they had not felt the need of formalizing a separate Muslim party for a long time, while their loyalties to these parties continued.

But with the clashes which started in the 1980’s, UNP and SLFP remained incapable of solving the problems that Muslims were facing. Muslims did not become part of the state’s crash on Tamil insurgency, but they could not be safe from being victims. Their problems and grievances were not taken into consideration by either state authorities or the parties involved in the settlement process of the ethnic conflict. The ongoing neglect towards their complaints led Muslims who were living in the eastern regions to seek regional autonomy. They made similar claims like Tamils regarding the recognition of their rights, entities, religious identity and the right of self-determination. However, these requests of Muslims have not been minded in the process of solution between Tamils and Sri Lanka.[2]

Therefore, ‘a separate political organization of Muslims’ was considered as an essential need for a durable

solution to the conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil rebels. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress/SLMC emerged in 1980 for the purpose of bringing the demands and interests of the Muslims to the agenda. Hence, the formation of the SLMC was a result of the failure of these two majority national parties.

The SLMC entered the state council as the main opposition during the 1980 elections in the north-eastern areas. While most of the Muslims continue to support the two major national parties, the number of SLMC representatives in state parliaments steadily increased over the years. When the majority parties in the parliament failed to constitute the government alone in the following years, the SLMC became an important coalition partner. Therefore, it started to function as a pressure group rather than being a mere political party.

Parallel to this process, the 2002-2005 peace talks created a huge disappointment among Muslims because of their non-inclusion. The idea of the right of Muslims to have a separate region, with the rising influence of SLMC by 1988, reinforced with *Oluvil Declaration* in 2003. This declaration has advocated the autonomy, self-determination of Muslims, securing the northern and eastern regions of Muslims within the framework of "traditional homeland". [3] But the declaration which was made by a group of Muslim students had so little impact and even wasn't brought to the parliament.

In fact, the idea of regional autonomy for Muslims was first expressed in 1986 by the East Ceylon Muslim Front ECMF. SLMC's importance was due to its success in bringing this request to the political arena. But any plan could not be designated due to the lack of a consensus among Muslims on how the autonomy could be realized with the Muslim population having scattered all over the country. [4]

As of those times, Sri Lankan Muslims' preference has been to be included in national existence and national politics of Sri Lanka in which they will be able to sound their demands and grievances for a solution, rather than territorial and political isolation that can make them a target of any racial and fundamentalist move. Thereupon, Muslims demonstrated a strong resilience which necessitates a strong will by not resorting to violence and not bearing arms. It has been argued that the reason why the Muslims did not resort to violence when claiming their rights is that they are dispersed all over the country and did not build any cross-border relation like other separatist groups. [5]

Sri Lanka tries to heal the wounds of the civil war between 1989-2009, however, it is apparent that there are attempts to create such turmoils in Sri Lanka as the communal conflicts taking place among other communities in Asia.

Within the last years, Sri Lanka managed to establish stability and peace in the country in the wake of the long and bloody clashes. But recent events that took place on March 2018 have created a fear about any possibility of turning back to the old days.

The state must act to protect its Muslim community which has contributed to the peace by adhering to the demands of the law as legal citizens. The Muslims did not apply separatism and thus it is incorrect to make them a target of rising Islamophobia.

Furthermore, Muslims in Sri Lanka have remained non-violent and it is the duty of the state to recognize this contribution and the fact that they have worked to resolve issues from within community and not through external interference. Thus, rather than to extol the distortions and fabrications of Islamophobic discourses, the state should to tribute these characteristics of the Sri Lankan Muslim community.

[1] Personal interview with Muslims in Sri Lanka via e-mail, April 10, 2018.

[2] S.M.Aliff, Provincial Council and Eastern Province Muslims of Sri Lanka, South Eastern University in Sri Lanka, A Research Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. 25, July-December 2010, p.199.

[3] S.M.Aliff, p.205.

[4] *ibid.*, p.211.

[5] Tanweer Fazal, (2012). *Minorities and their Nationalism(s): The terms of a discourse in South Asia*, South Asian History and Culture, 3:2 p. 174