

Anti-Muslim Riots in Sri Lanka: A Complicated Crisis

Abdul Basith, a 27 year old Muslim man had just gotten a job as a reporter for a local radio station in the Kandy district, Sri Lanka when he was trapped and killed at his family house set ablaze by the rioting Sinhalese Buddhist mob. Before his death, Abdul Basith sent an audio message to his uncle describing the scene, "They have burned the house, the house is burning" he said.

The unrest began on Sunday as angry mob of the majority Sinhalese Buddhists attacked houses, mosques and businesses of Muslims in the country that has seen a rise in hate attacks on Muslims over the past years. The latest tensions were sparked by the death of a Sinhalese truck driver who was injured and later died following a road rage incident involving Muslim men. Following the man's death on Saturday, extremist Buddhist monks appeared in the area, reportedly to offer their condolences but it is believed that their presence fuelled the unrest.

These particular Buddhist monks mostly outsiders of Kandy area had been reported in the past for inciting communal violence. The relations of Muslims and Buddhists in Kandy district had been historically harmonious, a resident, Shukry Cassim told al-Jazeera, "we share food during religious festivals, we play together and buy goods from each other's shops" he said. Indeed, the mob was reportedly consisting mostly people unknown to the area, but since they targeted only Muslim properties, they must have been guided by local elements. According to Alan Keenan from the International Crisis Group, the latest events have not been local clashes between Muslims and Buddhists but organized national-level Buddhist militant groups. It is believed these attacks are well planned and organized partly to provoke a Muslim response which would further justify more violence against them. But so far, Kanaan said, the Muslim community has "been admirably restrained"

These militant Buddhist groups first emerged in 2012-2014 with support from the government of former leader Mahinda Rajapaksa. Having lost power to the current coalition government led by President Maithiripala Sirisena, analysts say the unrests are orchestrated to fasten the fall of the current government which already suffered electoral losses in the recent February 28 local elections. Because the Sinhalese Buddhists make up the majority of the population, authorities fear appearing to favour Muslims would further weaken their position among the majority voters who are Buddhists. Therefore the government response seem insufficient and Muslim families are frightened. "We don't feel safe. All our children are traumatised" Cassim told al-Jazeera.

What are Muslims accused of?

The Sinhalese Buddhists are worried that the character of their country is under threat with the increasing Muslim growth rates. The Sinhalese believe their numbers are decreasing while the Muslims are increasing partly because the Muslims "do not practice birth control, marry four times, and have a secret plan to make Sri Lanka a Muslim majority country" writes The Citizen's P.K Balachandran. There was a rumour in Ampara district that Muslim eateries were adding a chemical pill to make Sinhalese Buddhist customers impotent. This rumour sparked off anti-Muslim riots there. A country of 21 million people, the Muslim population make up almost 10 per cent, Sinhalese 75 per cent and Tamils make up 15 per cent. The Muslims have not been living separately, they live across the island among both the Buddhists and the Tamils. Previously the relationship was mostly harmonious. However, the now deeply rooted fears among many Sinhalese that the Buddhist character of the island is under threat are widely promoted especially through social media with calls for violence.

What should be done to alleviate the problem?

The international community should bolster the Sri Lankan government's efforts to quell the unrest. Exerting too much pressure on the government could prove counterproductive as it would satisfy the instigator's desire to use communal violence as a tool to acquire political power. The return of Rajapakse's government to power through these unrests would make it worse for the minority Muslim population in the country.

In the long run, more diversity management programs should be initiated to help manage the interests of

the different communities in the country. Ethno-religiosity should be undermined in the country to prevent further ethno-religious identity mobilization. In such a multi-religious community, there are several identities that one may oscillate in and avoid targeted mobilization. Furthermore, efforts should be put in place to prevent separate existence. The events pose a risk of forcing people who had hitherto lived among others to isolate themselves. This would only worsen the situation as it embodies the hatred and makes inter-communal conflicts more overt. However, for now, a multi-thronged elite interest management campaign is required that would engage the key instigators of the violence, put at a disinformation strategy and soothe the people both Buddhist and Muslim and inspire them towards peace, unity and co-operation.