

# The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jas](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jas)**A.R.M. Imtiyaz** 

Department of Political Science/Asian Studies, Temple University, USA

## Abstract

This paper primarily examines the Easter Sunday bombing plotted and executed by a group of Sri Lankan Muslims and post-war Sri Lankan conditions among Sri Lankan Muslims, also known as Moors. The article will attempt to argue that (a) the post-war violence and organized Islamophobia among non-Muslim communities in general and the Sinhalese in particular increased fears and distrust among Sri Lankan Muslims in general; and (b) state concessions to Muslim political leaders, who supported successive Sri Lankan ruling classes from independence through the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, have meant an isolation of the community from the other two main ethnic communities. The concessions that the Muslim community has won actively helped the Muslim community to be proactive in its religious practices and thus paved the way for exclusive social and political choices. The rise of Islamic movements and mosques in the post-1977 period galvanized Muslims. In time this isolation has been reinforced by socio-religious revival among Muslims whose ethnic identity has been constructed along the lines of the Islamic faith by Muslim elites. Despite this revival it has been clear that the Muslim community has been reluctant to use Islamic traditions and principles for peace building, which could have helped to ease tensions, brought about by the 30-year-old ethnic conflict. Finally, some pragmatic ways to ease tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in the greater discipline of conflict resolution are explored using traditions within Islam.

## Keywords

Sri Lanka, Easter Sunday, bombing, Wahhabism/Sufism, masjid, monk, Islamophobia, Halal, identity, conflict, peace

## Introduction

“Why?” That was the key question shared by many observers when they were astonished by the wave of highly coordinated and well-planned suicide bombing by nine Sri Lankan Muslim men on Easter Sunday morning, 21 April 2019, that ripped through Colombo, capital of Sri Lanka and Batticaloa, a major city in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a state of approximately 20 million people that was previously considered a model of democracy in Asia. A simple answer blames the Arabization of Sri Lankan Muslims, but there are some socio-political as well as

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### Corresponding author:

A.R.M. Imtiyaz, Department of Political Science/Asian Studies, Temple University, 35 Granite Lane, Chester Springs, Pennsylvania, USA.

Email: [mohamedimtiyaz@yahoo.com](mailto:mohamedimtiyaz@yahoo.com)

cultural factors that contributed to the Easter bombing, that is now dubbed as Sri Lanka's "September 11".

Islamophobia has been one of the major trends in post-war Sri Lanka since 2009. There has been a wave of Islamophobic rhetoric and acts of violence against the Sri Lankan Muslim community being undertaken by extreme Sinhala-Buddhist groups (led by Buddhist monks), with tacit support from politicians, attacking places of worship and Islamic practices such as Halal food certification, cattle slaughter and dress code. Despite some high-profile cases such as a 2012 attack on a mosque in Dambulla, most incidents have received little or no attention locally or internationally. Of the accounted reports, there have been 65 cases of attacks on places of religious minority worship bearing the brunt of the violence, be they Christian, non-Theravada Buddhist, Hindu temples or Muslim mosques (Center for Policy Alternatives, 2015). This is seen as part of a coordinated hate campaign developed by an extreme Sinhalese-Buddhist organization called Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS), which has been responsible for inciting hatred, evident in the June 2014 attacks on Muslim businesses in Aluthgama, Beruwala, Shargatown and Dehiwala (Aluthgama Under Siege).

Why has the Sri Lankan state (predominantly led by its Sinhala-Buddhist constituents) now turned its back on the Muslim minority, given their close historical relationship? In particular, since Sri Lankan Muslims are considered to be a community that bridges the language gap between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, with a heritage of conflict transformation principles from the Islamic traditions, questions can be asked as to why they have not emerged as true peace makers in the country. Islam as a religion and a tradition is replete with teachings and practices of non-violence and peace building. Sri Lanka was involved in a 28-year civil war which caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions, coming to a bloody end in May 2009 (Haviland, 2009). Of course, there is no comprehensive and widely accepted theory of the causes and consequences of ethno-political conflict (Gurr, 1994). Instead, there are many factors that can lead to tensions between groups of people. This is true of the ethno-religious conflicts in Sri Lanka, which have largely been based on ethno-religious political difference; there has also been a conflation of economic, social and political interests that have determined a challenge in finding a space for all three major communities (and other ethnicities) to co-exist.

## **Some brief notes on Sri Lankan Muslims and their non-Tamil identity**

The Sri Lankan Muslim community is scattered across the island with the majority (62%) living outside of the north and east of Sri Lanka where the Sinhalese predominate, and with about 38% of the Muslim population living in the Tamil-dominated north and east. Initially the Muslims mainly inhabited the coastal areas of Sri Lanka but over time some of them moved into the interior. Today the majority (62%) live in the south of Sri Lanka, amid the Sinhalese, the remaining 38%, though, are established in the Tamil-dominated north and east, the region claimed by the Tamils as their traditional homeland (Imtiyaz, 2009). In a context where census-taking has become politicized, it is noteworthy that Muslims have become a majority in the Amparai District of Eastern Province, which is part of this region (Department of Census and Statistics—Sri Lanka, 2007). When the Tamil insurrection flared up in the 1980s, most Muslims pointedly stood aside. This is one of the main reasons the Tamil Tigers (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE) were always opposed to Muslim participation in any peace talks.

A central aspiration of the Muslims in contemporary Sri Lanka, according to McGilvray (1997), is their desire to develop a non-Tamil identity based on Islam. Radically shifting political developments, according to Ali (1997), "have made them realize that their interest lies in holding fast to

the religion of Islam and not to any ethnic category". But the Muslims of the north and east blame the Tamils for pushing them in this direction. Gripped by demographic anxiety and locked in competition with the Tamils for control over economic and land resources, they turned to religion as a way of bolstering their cohesion. This was a key factor in the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in the mid-1980s (at a time when the Muslims had established informal and formal contacts with the Sri Lanka state forces with a view to fighting against the Tamil Tigers).

However, the Muslims living in the south and west of Sri Lanka have not shown any similar inclination to support an exclusive Muslim party, despite also being increasingly marginalized by the majority Sinhalese. Why not? There are two major reasons. First, the Muslims from outside the north and east believe that the Sinhalese-dominated United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) accommodate their needs, especially those of the Muslim political elites who lead them, because these parties have given some significant (and not-so-significant) ministerial portfolios and positions to Muslims, in addition to substantial business benefits. Secondly, unlike their brethren in the non-North and Eastern Muslims have not been confronted with organized violence at the hands of Sinhalese-Buddhist extremist groups targeting their identity and existence.

There are contradictions facing the identity of Muslims in Sri Lanka and how they are classified and classify themselves. This has been in opposition to how other communities have described themselves. The constructivist approach aptly describes identity formation. Constructivists view ethnic identities as a product of human actions and choices, arguing that they are constructed and transmitted, and not genetically inherited, from the past (Taras and Ganguly, 2002: 4). As quoted in Imtiyaz and Stavis' (2008) study on ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, "Max Weber was one theorist who stressed the social origin of ethnic identity. Weber viewed each ethnic group as a 'human group' whose belief in a common ancestry (whether or not based in genetic reality) leads to the formation of a community (2008: 8)." Various constructivists have suggested that the desire to build armies and improve military capabilities, the failure of industrialization to create a homogeneous cultural structure and market, and the development of standardized communication systems, all made it possible to imagine and invent communities (Posen, 1993: 80–124).

In Sri Lanka, because of Sri Lanka's ethno-nationalist identity politics, the Muslim community, led by its political elites, has been forced to define itself as an "other" that is neither Sinhalese nor Tamil but Muslim. This identity has been a reactive force for Muslims because it was developed by Muslim elites "as a response to Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalistic ideologies" (Ali, 1997: 22–25). These formations, or how Muslims define themselves, are a by-product of social and political mobilization to secure rights and markets. Hence the situation today in Sri Lanka is that the Muslims are the only Sri Lankan ethnic group bearing a religious rather than a linguistic, ethnic or racial name, i.e. faith is not only a theological marker (a moral motivator) but also an identity marker (a communal galvanizer). This means that tensions and fault lines along racial and religious lines remain.

## **The Easter bombing bombers, the pre-Easter anti-Muslim campaigns, the bombers' supposed motivations and the entrance of Islamic State**

### *The bombers*

The Easter Day bomb blasts at three Sri Lankan churches and four hotels killed around 259 people, including at least 45 foreign nationals (US Official, Injured In Sri Lanka Suicide Attack, Dies In Hospital) and wounded hundreds more, following a lull in major attacks since the end of the civil

war 10 years previously (*The Times of India*, 2019). The Islamic State (IS) group has claimed responsibility for the attacks (Winsor and Jovanovic, 2019). The report (BBC, 2019) claimed that IS targeted “members of the US-led coalition and Christians in Sri Lanka”.

Sri Lankan authorities remain unsure of the group’s involvement despite IS’s claim of responsibility, though authorities are investigating whether foreign militants advised, funded or guided the local bombers. Sri Lankan authorities have blamed a local extremist group, National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ), whose leader, alternately named Mohammed Zahran or Zahran Hashmi, became known to Muslim leaders three years ago for his incendiary online speeches. All of the eight bombers were Sri Lankan Muslim citizens, including 34-year-old NTJ leader Mohamed Zahran, who “was one of two suicide bombers who blew themselves up at the Shangri-La hotel” (Amarasingham, 2019).

The other bomber at the Shangri-La was identified by Sri Lankan officials as Ilham Ibrahim, the 31-year-old son of one of Sri Lanka’s richest spice traders. He is believed to have been a driving force behind the organization of the attacks. Ilham’s elder brother Inshaf Ibrahim, whose father had set him up with a copper pipe factory, blew himself up at the Cinnamon Grand hotel. Some investigators believe their wealth possibly financed the entire plot. In Negombo, 20 miles north of the capital, Achchi Muhammadu Mohamed Hasthun, who is suspected of being one of the bomb makers, detonated his suicide device at St. Sebastian’s Church. (Ibid)

Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed, one of the terrorists, lived in London and spent a year at Kingston University on an aerospace engineering course in the academic year 2006/7, before travelling to Melbourne in Australia for a postgraduate course (*The Telegraph*, 2019).

### *Why did they resort to terrorism?*

Political violence is often a by-product of socio-economic tensions. Given the numerous cleavages and tensions in post-colonial societies, the factor that influences whether and how political violence breaks out is the way in which the political system deals with the tensions. Do political leaders and/or their supporters aggravate the tensions until they explode in violence? Do they recruit people to instigate acts of violence and then condone and protect them? In many cases, elite political leaders and/or their supporters believe they can win support and strengthen their positions by mobilizing along ethnic cleavages by resorting to violence or aggressive campaigns of hatred against the others. They anticipate that appeals to ethnic or religious hatred will be particularly effective in expanding or winning their power. Leaders sometimes encourage followers to use crude violence – pogroms or ethnic cleansing – or to exploit ethnic tensions in electoral politics. Outbidding opponents along ethnic lines is one of the strategies to win votes in (fragmented) societies that hold elections. This process frequently results in a polarization of the political system into ethnic divisions and a possible breakdown into violence. Marginalized minorities may suffer, emigrate or fight back with the weapons of the weak – terrorism and/or guerrilla activities (Brass, 1985). In this theoretical understanding, it is important to raise the question: what has motivated some Muslims to pursue violence? Have the rising tide of anti-Muslim campaigns in the island made some young and educated Muslims willingly turn themselves into suicide bombers?

Since the end of the ethnic civil war in Sri Lanka in May 2009, one of the major trends in Sri Lanka is the emergence of anti-Muslim actions by Sinhala-Buddhists groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS-translated as the Buddhist Power Force).<sup>1</sup> The campaign both online and on the ground has manifested in multiple forms, ranging from calls to boycott Muslim companies and Halal products, women’s clothing, to protests outside Muslim-owned retail outlets (Imtiyaz and Mohamed-Saleem, 2015).

Though many parts of southern Sri Lanka have been the target areas of anti-Muslim campaigns by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups, the North-Western Province has been in recent times been a hotbed of activity (Jayaraj, 2013). The activities (the carrying of placards depicting Allah as a pig and burning of an effigy marked as Allah) are not only considered to be offensive to Muslims, but also in the case of Sri Lanka Muslims, go to the heart of attacking the sense of identity and values they have been practising. In March 2018, a new wave of attacks by the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists further increased insecurity and fears among Sri Lanka Muslims. The mob carefully targeted Muslims, their properties and places of worship. The wave of violence was reportedly sparked by an incident of road rage involving a Sinhalese truck driver and a group of Muslim men in Kandy district in the central highlands on 22 February. The latter assaulted the Sinhalese driver, which resulted in his death at a hospital a few days later. The day after his death, Sinhalese mobs went on a rampage, attacking Muslims and burning their homes, shops and vehicles. The violence has since spread to other districts (Yousuf, 2018).

The wave of violence against Muslims since 2012 helped polarize the Sri Lankan polity while eroding the trust of Muslims in general over Sri Lanka's state and its institutions. This trend challenged Sri Lanka's stability because it resulted in a polarization and a possible breakdown into violence by some Muslims. The statement from Sri Lanka Thowheed Jamath (SLTJ) President A.K. Hisham during his testimony before the Parliament Select Committee (PSC) appointed to probe the circumstances behind the Easter Sunday attack suggested that the 21 April terrorists "may have resorted to terrorism after the Beruwala and Digana incidents" ('Zaharan came to Akkaraipattu a month prior to April 21 attack', *Onlanka*, 2019). My communications in May 2019 with some Muslim university students from the South Eastern University and some lecturers suggested that Muslims were frustrated with the violence targeted against the Muslims by Sinhala mobs (Interviews were conducted via skype and wechat around 25 Sri Lankan Muslims. 15 of them are men and 10 of them are women aged between 20–55 from Colombo, Sainthamaruthu, Galle, Gampaha and Jaffna districts, 2019). Some of them shared concerns that some Muslims might mirror the Tamil Tigers to punish the state and its institutions.

It is theoretically expected that the violence unleashed on Muslims could provoke a strong response from Muslim youth. It could be a triggering factor for radicalizing Muslim youth. Though the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has kept itself busy with business and trade, carefully planned violence by Sinhala mobs could have pushed some Muslims to resort to violence by marginalizing Muslim moderates and democratic political representations.

### *Why did bombers target Christian places of worship?*

As discussed above, the Muslim community has been the major target of Sinhala mobs since the end of the civil war with the Tamil Tigers. However, the Easter Sunday terrorist attackers carefully targeted Christian churches and Christians, who have been facing intimidation and violence from the Sinhala mobs. Christians are a well-integrated community in Sri Lanka and "apart from militant Buddhist extremists, they have not been targeted either by the government or by other elements in society" (Shapiro, Ari interview with Schmalz, Mathew, NPR April 2019). This leads to a critical question: why did bombers target Christians and their places of worship?

There is no solid answer to the question. But "pro-Islamic State posts on social media claim that the attacks were a response to the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shootings that killed 50 Muslims. The Sri Lankan government has also concluded that the Christchurch shootings were what inspired the attack (De Votta, 2019)." But the murder of Muslim worshippers in New Zealand had nothing to do with Sri Lanka or Sri Lankans. So why was the country chosen?

IS basically harbours a very strict form of Islamic identity of “narratives rooted in a binary of ‘believers’ versus ‘infidels’” (De Votta, 2019). An attack on Muslims by infidels, for IS, is an attack on the entire Muslim community across the world. This world view may encourage an attack on those infidels who target Muslims anywhere. “As far as the Islamic State and its affiliates are concerned, then, Sri Lankan Christians qualify to being attacked” (De Votta, 2019). According to this line of understanding, any country with a Christian population may become a target for IS and its affiliates if needed. The IS attacks may be staged in a country where security is being compromised due to internal political power struggles and divisions.

Another powerful reason as to why Sri Lanka was picked by IS attempts to establish a link between rising Islamophobia and the real or perceived marginalization of Sri Lanka Muslims by anti-Muslim attacks. IS was able to attract Muslims across the world for its global campaign so it transformed into a transnational Islamic movement. “It may turn out that some of the suicide bombers had traveled to Islamic State redoubts in the Middle East, but even if none did, the anti-Muslim sentiment that has bubbled up in Sri Lanka since 2012 was arguably sufficient to radicalize Sri Lankan Muslims at home” (De Votta, 2019).

### *The role of Islamic State*

Two days after the terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, “the IS took credit for the bombings” (Srinivasan, 2019). Though Muslims in Sri Lanka were aware of IS’ ideologies and its political mobilizations in the Middle East, there was no any obvious sign of the IS military mobilization in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan authorities have blamed a local extremist group, NTJ, but, there is no conclusive evidence that IS planned, guided and executed the terrorist attacks. It seems that NTJ – whose leader, Zahran Hashmi, became known to Muslim leaders three years ago for his incendiary online speeches against non-Muslims – was attracted by the IS campaigns and mobilizations in the Middle East. This “attraction” does not help to establish a direct link between Mohammed Zahran and his team and IS. Sri Lankan authorities have not established any conclusive evidences to blame IS for the 21 April terrorist attacks. However, in 2016 Sri Lankan authorities claimed that “thirty-two Sri Lankan Muslims from ‘well-educated and elite’ families have joined Islamic State in Syria” (Aneez, 2016). The government spokesperson claimed that “all these (Muslims) are not from ordinary families. These people are from the families which are considered as well-educated and elite” (Aneez, 2016). Muslim civil society organizations such as the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (MCSL), an umbrella body that includes most Muslim organizations in the country, rejected the statement from Sri Lanka authorities, saying the statement came at a “very opportune time to certain extremist elements bent on tarnishing the image” of Sri Lankan Muslims (Aneez, 2016).

Though there is no conclusive evidence to establish a link between IS and the 21 April terrorists, it is true that during the ethnic civil war against the Tamil Tigers, “there is discontent among Muslims, particularly among the young in some areas” (Luthra, 2004), and it radicalized a section of the eastern Muslims (Imtiyaz, 2005). Radicalization among eastern Muslims was confined to a basic level and a remarkable number of the Muslims of the region are active in embracing the radical Islamic ideology to eradicate all ethnic identities and make religious identity paramount. Unemployment, frustration and Tamil violence as well as the inability of the Muslim political representations to fix the problems of the Muslims of the east motivated some Muslims to adopt violence. Such groups are active though “they are small and not a major security threat” (International Crisis Group, 2007: 3).

Since the end of the civil war against the Tamil Tigers, Muslims, who supported the state against the Tamil Tigers, expected the peace, but experiences suggest that Sri Lankan Muslims in southern



Sri Lanka have become the target of Sinhala-Buddhist mobs. However, there is no evidence at this point to prove that IS has been exploiting Sri Lankan Muslims' grievances for its own agenda.

## **State concessions to Sri Lankan Muslim elites**

In deeply divided democratic societies, politicians would employ different vote outbidding policies to win votes. In Sri Lanka, since independence, Sinhala politicians attached to the major political parties promised attractive policies to woo minority politicians. Minority politicians benefited from Sinhala politicians' offer of cabinet positions, and other significant and non-significant positions and packages.

Sri Lankan Muslim politicians won various political and administrative positions as both Tamil and Christian politicians won in post-independence Sri Lanka. It is true that though Muslims in Sri Lanka are a numerically small community, their elites have won significant political and religious concessions for the community from the time of independence. State concessions such as ministerial positions, giving cultural autonomy to Muslims were made possible to the fact that Muslims are placed as a second order minority in deeply divided ethno-religious make-up and politics. The close links the Muslims had with the Sinhalese in trade and business, and the strategy of political opportunism to win political and social benefits, ensured security (mainly from the Tamils) and safeguarded their commercial interests. These benefits prompted the Muslim elite to lean towards the Sinhalese political establishments.

While the cooperation of the Muslim elite with the Sinhalese ruling class won important ministerial portfolios for Muslims in successive governments, the resulting economic and social benefits ensured their freedom to practise their religion (such as to establish mosques and madrassas, and issue Halal food certification). Thus the Muslim masses largely remained untroubled by the conflict (except those in the north and east directly engaged with the Tamil community). By "appeasing" the Muslims who welcomed state concessions to their faith, which is rooted in Arabic culture and identity, mainly those outside of the north and east of the country, in this manner, the identity of the Muslims was further compounded within a socio-cultural and religious framework. In other words, state concessions to Muslim elites contributed to the rise of a conservative form of Islam among Sri Lankan Muslims at the popular level. It is true that the state also provided concessions both to Tamil and Catholic minorities. The concessions both Tamils and Catholics won from the state are mainly political in nature. But the concessions from the state to Muslim elites basically empowered Muslim identity formation and religious bases; for example, hundreds of madrassas were established in Sri Lanka after 1983 in areas where Muslims would have significant domination, including in Colombo.

Muslim politicians won their votes from their Muslim constituencies by promising religious benefits such as the allocation of lands for mosques and madrasa buildings. Muslim voters responded to Muslim politicians' symbolic appeals, which are fundamentally the Middle East in nature due to their Arab ancestry. Muslim politicians, by and large, delivered their promises and thus contributed to the isolation.

Mosques and madrasa buildings are being built without much resistance from local Sinhala authorities. As for madrasas, local madrasas often target economically weaker sections of Muslims, who are very proud of their Arab culture and the Middle Eastern background. The students are being taught in Tamil, but madrasas pay significant attention to teaching both Arabic language and Islam (Gafoordeen et al., 2013). Madrasa students are not being trained in any modern education or English. The madrasa managements often hostile to any constructive suggestions from Muslim scholars (Interview, 2019). According to a key authority on madrasas in Colombo, classes are often conducted by poorly educated teachers who have no meaningful knowledge of

modernity. Though Muslim scholars want the Sri Lankan state to take action to regulate madrasa education, successive Sri Lankan administrations did not take any actions to regulate madrasahs. It is partly because of fear of losing Muslim support for power mobilization.

Apart from madrasahs, there exist Arabic Colleges in Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> “At the moment, there are more than 205 Madrasahs registered as Arabic Colleges (AC). Most of them are following the Dar’s - e- Nizami syllabus/India madrasah system in teaching and management. These colleges are private institutions registered under the act of Muslim cultural affairs of Sri Lanka” (Gafoordeen et al., April 2013). These Arabic Colleges’ curricula are poorly organized and do not include any teaching on science or technology (Ibid). Also, the Arabic language teachers of arabic colleges have not trained to teach the Arabic language. The teaching environment is not suitable for a range of aptitude of students in a class.

Madrasahs in Sri Lanka have functioned out of mainstream education supervision and management until June 2019 (Madrasahs to be regulated under ministry of education: DG ISPR, 2019). Actions are being taken to “include contemporary subjects” and “madrasahs will be under the Ministry of Education (Madrasahs to be regulated under ministry of education: DG ISPR, 2019). My personal communication with madrasah teachers and management in 2018 in Colombo suggested that madrasah students are being guided to hate the West and to consolidate a pan-Arabic identity for Muslims in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is important note that state concessions over madrasahs and Arabic Colleges for Muslims helped galvanize Muslims, while pushing Muslims into an isolated socio-cultural spaces.

With emphasis on religious identity now being thrust upon its political and social circles, the Muslim community was able to extract cultural concessions from the state, which only served to harden this “ethno-religious” identity and provide a solid platform for an Islamic “exclusivism”. The rise of mosque building in Sri Lanka is one of the key concessions Muslim politicians have won from successive administrations. For Muslims, mosques play a central role in their life and existence. Local law and order institutions paid little or no attention to ensuring whether any new mosque constructions would get an official approval. In May 2019, “Colombo Mayor Rosy Senanayake requested Mowlavis to get unregistered mosques registered with the CMC considering the current situation prevailing in the country” (Mayor urges unregistered mosques to be registered, 2019).

The identity of Sri Lankan Muslims was further influenced as a result of the global Islamic reformation process that took place, post-Iranian revolution, coupled with Middle Eastern petrodollar funding, spurring large-scale movements to spread Islam and migration of people for Middle Eastern employment. It is important to note that the UNP’s economic policies to liberalize the Sri Lankan economy in 1978 opened the doors for economically weaker sections of Muslims to seek job opportunities in the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. My communications with Muslims who secured jobs in the Middle Eastern countries suggest that they became more religious when they were in the Middle East (Interview, 2019). During the 1980s, Sri Lankan ethnic conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese triggered instability and thus seriously destabilized the country. Muslims who live in the north and east confronted challenges. Those challenges, according to some Muslims, solidified Muslims’ Arabic identity by consolidating their non-Tamil identity. This trend also became obvious when Muslims were targeted by Sinhala-Buddhist mobs from 2012. That is to say that the rising violence against Muslims in cosmopolitan areas such as Kandy and Galle increased insecurity among Muslims. Some Muslims embraced Muslim identity markers such as the niqab, abaya or praying five times a day as a measure of protection. They, according to my communications with some of them (Interview, 2019), thought that their God, Allah, would protect them from evil schemes planned and executed by non-Muslims, or Kafirs.



The Sinhala-Buddhist extremists see the rise of Muslim symbols such as the niqab and mosques as the ‘Islamization’ of Sri Lanka, but in deeply divided democratic societies, this type of concession may be an inevitable result of political bargaining, but such concessions may be politicized by dominant forces for their own power mobilization.

## Easing tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims

The homogeneous element (or Ummah, as described above) is being seized upon as a negative trend (especially with the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists) arguing that the ‘Islamization’ of Sri Lanka opens the door to extremist tendencies. Yet it perhaps can also be a “saving grace” to see how tensions can be eased by Muslims between Muslims and non-Muslims. In order for this to happen, one must look within the Muslim community, understanding their own traditions, principles and values.

Using the fact that faith is both a moral motivator and theological marker, it is imperative to understand the concept of a developing Islamic jurisprudence principle, called *fiqh al-aqaliyyat* (jurisprudence of minorities). This has been used so far to look at the situation of Muslim minorities living in the West facing the challenges of a secular law and culture as well as issues of identity and citizenship that have taken a turn for the worse in the aftermath of 9/11.

The *fiqh* (jurisprudence) tradition has engaged in considerable detail with the status of non-Muslim minorities living in Muslim-majority societies but not with the position of Muslim minorities residing in non-Muslim-majority countries. Large-scale migration of Muslims to Western countries as a twentieth-century post-colonial phenomenon has, for the most part, prompted the rethinking of this condition which has applicability for the Muslim context in Sri Lanka.

In essence, the tradition reaffirms the notion and provides theological paradigms that guide Muslim minorities, who are expected to observe the ethical guidelines of Islam and its essentials as well as the guidelines of the Qur’an and Sunnah concerning their relations with the followers of other religions. In short, they must accordingly cultivate mutual respect and friendship with their host communities. Many Muslim scholars of standing have subscribed to the view that Muslims living in non-Muslim-majority countries must live as law-abiding citizens. They are also expected to be honest and trustworthy, and remain open to beneficial changes that help them live in peace and harmony (March, 2009).

*Fiqh al-aqaliyyāt* is widely regarded as a new field of study. Yet many scholars who have spoken on the subject have considered it as an extension of the rich edifice of *fiqh* (March, 2009). Nevertheless, the objectives of *fiqh al-aqaliyyāt* are somewhat more specific due to the new conditions and challenges faced by Muslim minorities and it is important that Islamic texts and scriptures are read and interpreted in the light of historical and contemporary developments.

When tackling newly emerging issues among minorities in quest of a response to the challenges they face, the jurist is advised to pay attention to considerations of public interest (*maḥallāh*) that include the interests of these groups as well as the communities and nations in which they reside. It is also acknowledged that some of the issues faced may need to be addressed in a wider context, even outside the scopes respectively of *fiqh* and law due to the need to move abreast with the dynamics of political and economic developments affecting the lives of Muslim minorities. In sum, *fiqh al-aqaliyyāt* would be unable to meet its desired objectives without a degree of openness to the influence of other disciplines and non-*fiqh* sources, such as sociology, economics, medicine, law and political science. To meet these challenges, Muslim scholars and researchers are similarly advised to take into consideration the higher goals and purposes (*maqasīd*) of Shariah (Hussain, 2016).

*Fiqh* of minorities should aim, according to several leading maxims (Hussain, 2016), at bringing ease and relief to minorities to enable them to overcome their difficulties. Muslim minorities should be able not only to preserve their religious identity but also to perform their civic duties as good citizens of their respective countries. It is imperative, then, to vindicate justice and fair dealings as the higher objectives of Islam and the pillars of peace and honorable living for all those who wish to live in peace and harmony with one another.

In Sri Lanka, as mentioned above, Muslims are being identified with Islam and Middle Eastern culture. There is a likelihood of manipulation of the Muslim identity by external Islamic forces such as IS. The terrorist bombings of 21 April clearly indicate that pan-Arabic Islamic terrorist movements have eyes on Sri Lanka and they would exploit the local tensions and aspirations to meet their own agendas. Since Sri Lankan Muslims' identity is deeply attached to pan-Arabic symbols, it is rather easy for external Islamists to use and misuse Sri Lankan Muslims for their own agendas. The key revelation related to the radicalization of Muslims three years ago claimed that "thirty-two Sri Lankan Muslims from 'well-educated and elite' families have joined Islamic State in Syria" (Aneez, 2016). Muslim community leaders casted doubts about the development (Aneez, 2016), but democratic representations of the Muslim community failed to recognize the rising radicalization among a section of Muslims.

It is important for minority community leaders to seek political priorities, demands and choices that would not lead to unnecessary mistrust and tensions in a society where the majority has political domination and cleavages. This does not suggest that minorities learn to live as obediently as they can, but in democratic, but divided, societies such political leaning may help generate peace and confidence at the popular level. In Sri Lanka, Muslim elites need to seek better ways to manage tensions with non-Muslim communities. Muslim political leaders in Sri Lanka are no exception to Downs' theory that political leaders make choices or "formulate policies in order to win elections" (Downs, 1957: 28).

To seek an intervention, Muslim leaders need to recognize their own community's crisis. As discussed above, due to the nature of politics and the conflict in Sri Lanka, the Muslim community has been forced to define itself and seek its own discourse. While Muslims are aware of the challenges they face, they have to be able to understand where they have gone wrong. While there is a realization that exclusive social practices and value-practice among Muslims themselves have to be curtailed, this has to allow for the beginning of a potential conversation in ensuring that tensions can be alleviated.

## **Concluding remarks**

Muslim democratic representations need to play "genuine and responsible" political roles in national affairs. Also, Muslim politicians need to understand the consequences of employing symbolic religious slogans to win the votes of Muslims who value religious identity over other traits. It is very likely that too much dependency on religion to just win elections could transform society into the stage where commitments to non-violence can be discouraged as Sri Lanka witnessed on 21 April 2019. Transnational Islamic movements such as IS are very active in recruiting from polarized regions, and Sri Lanka might become a breeding ground for such group recruitment. Therefore, it is very important for Muslim politicians not to use religious symbols and emotional rhetoric to win votes. It is the fact that the current world is highly connected by technology and thus people who have access to modern technology would be able to read and to know the trends that take place beyond their own geographical borders.

Islamic fundamentalism in Sri Lanka also can be read as a by-product of the state's cultural and socio-economic concessions in the 1970s and 1980s to the Muslim elites to win Muslim support.

Needless to say, the state's cultural concessions delighted Muslims, but some cultural concessions offered in the past could have provided a solid platform for the recent growth of Islamic exclusivism. It is politically wrong to veil the trend. And denial from the Muslim political establishment about the existence of Islamic fundamentalist trends may reduce the Muslim democratic voices to mere voices that are only aspiring to power.

Rising Islamophobia is one of worrying trends in post-war Sri Lanka. It is important to note that the state is not primarily Islamophobic in Sri Lanka, but politicians and their supporters use anti-minority slogans for power mobilization. Sri Lanka's electoral history confirms this tendency (Imtiyaz, 2014). But the state may use this Islamophobia from below to woo Sinhala support. This indirect state-supported Islamophobia is equally dangerous as the state would openly identify itself as Islamophobic. Sri Lankan security forces' failure to act against the Sinhala mobs and certain police forces' support for the Sinhala mobs to attack Muslims and their properties suggest state complicity in violence against Muslims in May 2019.

As discussed above, growing Islamic fundamentalism, which was and is the by-product of several socio-political realities, needs to be monitored and contained for a better future. But those measures need to be carefully conducted. Any arbitrary action, including arrests, may serve to ignite both fears and tensions. "On May 17, police in central Sri Lanka arrested Abdul Raheem Mazahina, 47-year-old grandmother, because of the pattern on her dress. During the 17 days that she spent behind bars, guards repeatedly referred to Mazahina as a 'terrorist'" (Fuller and Rizvie, 2019b). It is the responsibility of the state and Sri Lanka politicians to win over minorities by easing their fears and boosting their confidence. Recent moves by the state such as banning the abaya and niqab "in public in a bid to help police track down wanted terrorists" were not received positively by certain sections of Sri Lanka Muslims (Baker, 2019).

There are several political ways to win over the trust of minorities in democratic plural societies. One of them is to offer meaningful socio-economic concessions. Ruling and/or opposition politicians should not promise and/or deliver any religio-cultural concessions to minority politicians. Fears from the majority Sinhalese may be eased when concessions are purely socio-economic rather than religio-cultural concessions.

Importantly, the Sri Lankan state has a responsibility to regulate all religious schools, including madrassas. No funds from foreign countries should be allowed without state supervision to any schools, including religious schools. The syllabus of all religious schools should be prepared by community-approved scholars who have greater understanding of both a particular religion and non-religious education. On the other hand, Sri Lanka's ruling and opposition Sinhala politicians should not resort to destructive paths to fight extremism. The fight against terrorism should be designed both politically and economically. Strategic mechanisms need to be employed to win over the Muslims, who have been cooperating with the state and its institutions to fight radicals among them even prior to the 21 April terrorist bombings. In sum, the government in Colombo should do more to protect Muslims from revenge attacks and to confront rising Islamophobia.

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## ORCID iD

A.R.M. Imtiyaz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9537-4632>

## Notes

1. BBS is a radical Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist organization based in Colombo, Sri Lanka that was formed during 2012. BBS seeks the enforcement of Buddhist predominance in Sri Lanka. It has organized various campaigns against the country's minority Muslim and Christian communities which, according to the organization, pose a threat to Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-Buddhist identity. BBS engages in hate speech and attacks against minority religions. Its headquarters are located at Sri Sambuddha Jayanthi Mandira in Colombo. Sri Sambuddha Jayanthi Mandira is owned by the Buddhist Cultural Center, an organization founded by Kirama Wimalajothi.
2. "For the record, there are 749 Muslim Schools in Sri Lanka, and 205 madrasas registered under the Department of Muslim cultural affairs which provide Islamic education. The Islamic university in Beruwala (Jamiya Naleemiya) and Two State Universities offer first degree in Arabic and Islamic studies. Two other universities are offering General Degree programmes. Although, Government Teachers Training Colleges (GTTC) and Colleges of Education have been established to train the teachers for teaching Islam, and Arabic language at government schools (Ministry of Education, 2010). There is a Muslim Religious consultative Board appointed by the Ministry of Education to counsel the government on matters related to the teaching of Islam and Arabic in schools (Ministry of Education, 2010). The Muslim Unit of the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education (NIE) frequently conducts seminars for teachers of Arabic and Islamic studies" (Gafoordeen et al., 2013).

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### **Author biography**

A.R.M. Imtiyaz's research projects examine ethnic conflict and post-war peace in South Asia and China, and he has published widely in scholarly journals both in the US and the UK. He taught ethnic conflict and nationalism at the Department of Political Science, Temple University, USA, from 2009 to 2017. Currently, he lives in China for his research work.