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# Re-Thinking Muslim Political Identity in Sri Lanka

**Amjad Mohamed-Saleem**[1]

**Abstract:** The Muslims in Sri Lanka have an identity crisis that affects their political representation. Whilst this has enabled them to pursue a path of accommodationist politics, there has been an evolution in the grassroots around Muslim politics. This challenges the Muslim political representation especially in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks. It explores the formation of identity based on imagined communities and geographies that is also based on a lost *ummatic* identity. This paper discusses the concept of Sri Lankan 'Muslim' identity which is politically 'constructed' as a response to colonial influence as well as nationalistic aspirations of other ethnic communities within the country. As a result, ethnic institutionalisation which leads to religious consciousness had transformed into a political identity for survival leaving the community with a hybrid identity. The paper discusses that the political elites from the community were intent on pushing for a political identity but did not consider the changing dynamics of the context. It shows that the consistency of the transformation of the minorities due to changing demographic contexts at the grassroots amidst static political contexts reflects that the legitimacy of political elites from the minority communities is undermined, unless they can transform to meet these challenges. This shows a need to reimagine how identity is formed and its narration to manage relations with the 'Other'. The paper also offers some insights into how the Muslim political representation can be reimagined.

**Keywords:** Politics, Imagined Communities, Imagined Geography, Muslims, Sri Lanka, Identity Crisis.

[1] *Amjad Mohamed-Saleem* is a development practitioner, political analyst and a commentator on Sri Lankan affairs. He has a PhD on Muslim identity in Sri Lanka from Exeter University, United Kingdom. He had worked at different international organisations in the field of development, peace building and humanitarian affairs. He can be reached at amjad@paths2people.com.

## Introduction

There is an identity crisis currently being faced by the Sri Lankan Muslim community as it navigates between trying to find an ethnic identity, a political representation and remaining true to religious values. This tension around Muslim identity leads to a sense of frustration (Ismail Q. , 1997) due to the inability to fully understand and articulate the identity of the Sri Lankan Muslims as well as the inability to recognise where the 'Muslim' fits within the Sri Lankan national consciousness. Though there have been different perspectives around Muslim identity in Sri Lanka (see Hussein, 2018; Bush, 2003; Asad, 1993; Shukri, 1989; Deverajah, 1994), there are very few which express a sense of frustration (and despair) with the inability to holistically articulate the identity of the Sri Lankan Muslim. Hence, this paper attempts to discuss the political identity of the Muslims, which is seen as the public face of this identity crisis.

The tension has been felt especially since 2019, after the Easter Sunday attacks, which challenges the Muslim identity as a whole (Irshad, 2019) to not only condemn the attacks carried out by a local group affiliated with ISIS and to prove 'patriotism', but also to deal with anti-Muslim violence affecting the country in the aftermath of the violence (Amarasingam & Fuller, 2019). The latter incidents in particular had put a strain on the expression of Muslim political identity, especially as it has been a recurring feature of the previous few years (Reuters, 2018; Mashal & Bastian, 2018; Tegal, 2014). However, the violence against Muslims in 2019 and the immediate preceding years is nothing new but represents repeated anti-Muslim violence that occurred in Sri Lanka over the past three to four decades (Nagaraj & Haniffa, 2017). With the current COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the Muslims are once again been targeted and represented in the media as the main cause of spread the virus in Sri Lanka and had their basic burial rites being denied (Saleem, 2020).What is clear especially from the recent violence and vilification (2014-2020) is that the Muslims and their identity have become the target of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists. The various dimensions of the Muslim identity have been systematically challenged by the latter, ranging from halal certification, to *niqab*, to Islamic financing and even to political engagements. The challenge comes from two perspectives: (1) the spreading of myths about the community that makes the community scapegoats in terms of representing their identity

as a threat to the Sinhala-Buddhist economic dominance and racist population politics (Wettimuny, 2018) and; (2) the indifference and silence of the majority (Gunasekara, 2018).

> The phenomenon of Islam in Sri Lanka is not new, and can be traced back to Arab traders (Shukri, 1989) coming to Sri Lanka before and after the advent of Islam as well as through a history of migration as a result of colonisation. The ethnic categorisations of 'Muslims' were primarily constructed in response to emerging nationalism from other communities in Sri Lanka in the 19th century but, the community have struggled to carve out their ethnic space, frequently compressed between two dominant ethno-nationalism projects (Ismail Q. , 1997).

The question for the Muslim community is 'how does one navigate religious expression in an ethnic identity discourse that is also challenged by political biasness?' Thus, it is in this light, that the discussions of Muslim political identity need to be framed, understood and discussed. This identity has occupied a perilous position, being compressed between two dominant identity groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. It is also being subjected to a context of Sri Lanka of "cultural and religious beliefs that imbricate with economic and political factors in forming the dominant power structures such as nation-states in a network of local and global powers" (Fernando, 2008, p. 8). The politics of interpretation (within and without the Muslim community) has undoubtedly created a tension in the institutionalisation of the Muslim identity as it wrestles between the distinction of faith as a theological marker (i.e. a religious motivator, a political representation) and faith as an identity marker (i.e. a communal galvanizer). This tension for the Muslim community in Sri Lanka centres around the nexus of political and ethnic identity versus religious expression in which the latter incorporates personal (and social) capital while the former only incorporates social capital. In this regard, Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' and Edward Said's 'imagined geography' theses are transformed into an 'imagined Muslim community' with a struggle between the local and the universal, such as the local community versus the global transnational Islamic community (or the *ummah*). Hence, there is always a dynamic tension between the relatively local focus and the civilisational focus, as well as the struggle of forming specific concept of moral patriotism and how

it may reflect a sense of belonging to a larger collective community such as the Islamic community. In addition, Barth's discussion of ethnic boundaries is worth mentioning while discussing self-identity with social interaction. In other words, it is impossible for an individual to have an ethnic identity in isolation which needs to be declared in opposition to another person. In this perspective, the tension and challenge for the Muslim community is reflected in how it interprets its relationship on a transnational scale and within the local context. This paper suggests a holistic re-imagination of Sri Lankan Muslim political identity, expression and agency as well as an approach to the conversation. This paper addresses the gap in understanding the political identity of the Sri Lankan Muslim community, especially in moving forward after the Easter Sunday attacks which had led to more public scrutiny. The aftermath of the incident calls for the Muslims to assimilate and accommodate the 'Sri Lankan' identity. The paper also addresses the dynamics of politically active minorities and attempts to demonstrate how evolving circumstances and contexts need to be comprehended to ensure relevance and coherence. Finally, it is important to note that this paper is an analysis of the identity of the community based on primary and secondary sources.

## An Imagined Community with Imagined Geographies

The Muslim identity in Sri Lanka has emerged from a constructivist perspective which constructs an ethnic identity by instrumentalising religion for political reasons. Thus, the community is unique in that sense that they have become an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) with an 'imagined geography' (Said, 2000).

Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities is useful to anchor the Muslim community. Since, despite not actually knowing all other members of the community – or even having face to face contact at the time of discussion, the community was 'imagined' by political elites in the sense of horizontal comradeship and shared history; yet, the actual inequalities and hierarchies that existed in reality, and the limitations because of an understanding of a 'boundary' (Anderson, 1983). This boundary is better explained clearly through the imagined geography narrative, that Edward Said (2000) has used to evolve this concept as a form of social constructionism from the imagined community narrative.

The term ‘imagined’ in this context, refers to ‘perceived’. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1993) pointed out that no human will be completely free from the struggle over geography, territory, space and place.

From this point of view, the formation of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity is based on a perceived link to history, time and space. This imagined geography for the processes of cultural intervention of the Sri Lankan Muslim narrative was shaped by a long tradition of efforts to forge effective political formations in times of global crises. In other words, these efforts with transnational ambitions had profoundly shaped the history of the 20th century which includes the legacies of anti-colonial movements and other internationalist thought. According to Said (1993, 2000), imaginative geography is a form of invention used by practitioners of an empire to re-interpret the meaning of certain territories and create discourses justifying the need for control over such re-imagined places. This exercise in imagination begins by reconstructing the history of those places coveted by empire builders. This practice of constructing alternative representations of places and people is what Edward Said refers to as the crafting of ‘imaginative geographies’ (Said, 1993; Said, 2000).[2] Thus “institutionalising Muslim difference, the British, in a crucial sense, helped ‘create’ Muslim identity” (Ismail Q. , 1997, p. 73).

According to Barth (1969), discussions on ‘ethnic boundaries’ canalises social life which frequently entails a rather complex organisation of behaviour and social relations whilst recognising a limitation of shared understandings and differences in criteria for judgement of value. Based on this perspective, ethnic groups may persist as significant units if they imply marked differences in behaviour and allow the persistence of cultural differences. Hence, ethnic divisions in Sri Lanka were formed and reinforced as a result of the boundaries placed by different groups and the interactions which occurred between them. This is particularly reinforced by the Muslims themselves who use the term ‘Muslim’ as a religious, political and cultural signifier, considering it as their identifier under which they pressure for action on issues that allow them to take on the concern of an ‘ethnic’ community. Thus, the term ‘Muslim’ is

[2] It is clear that the formation of the Moor or Muslim identity by the political elites in response to colonial periods, also tried to imagine a `geographical` space with links to a pan Arab citizenship and transnational Islamic expression.

frequently associated with political, ethnic, cultural as well as religious point of view and this is replicated in academic discourse.

The term 'Muslim Community' used to describe Sri Lankan Muslims reflects a sense of homogeneity across the heterogeneous ideological and geographical groups that constitute Muslims in Sri Lanka. The term also poses some challenges due to the usage of religious labels as ethnic markers. It indicates a theological and scriptural basis for the formulation of an identity based on common acceptance which views that anyone who performs the rituals, such as the five daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimage, is a devout Muslim. As a consequence, the default position is that Muslim identity revolves around rituals and dogma, which form the most important feature in Islam, and where moral and social responsibilities fit in (Yakun, 1990).

Osman Bakar further defines that the Muslim *ummatic* identity is based on the Qur'anic concepts of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God) and the "Muhammadan Shariah" (Bakar, 2012). It is these concepts that formed the basis of the *ummatic* identity which is a fundamental theme in Islamic discourse which is based on the unity of Muslims, as differing communities united by faith; expressed through the concept of an *ummah* (community) that transcends internal divisions (al-Ahsan, 1992). The traditional Muslim *ummatic* identity was founded on the twin principles of divine unity and Muḥammadan apostleship" (Bakar, 2012). Yet this has become lost as a result of many occurrences including the encounters of Muslim societies with the European empires (Aydin, 2017). As a result, narratives presented about Islam by Muslims err towards presenting the faith as unified and potentially monolithic, based on a perfected form revealed in the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Hence, "the key assumption of orthodox Islamic thought that doctrines have been set out in the unchangeable and faultless form of the Qur'an; and that therefore any belief or practice can be challenged only so far as it does not have a real basis in the original truths that were revealed to Mohamed" (Jacobson, 1998, p. 112). However, this concept of Muslim 'exceptionalism' and monolithic unity is unsubstantiated because it "derives not from the theological requirements…but from the legacy of imperial racialisation" (Aydin, 2017, p. 6).

Nevertheless, it is based on this notion that the Muslim community, led by the political elites, institutionalised their identity, founded on an

imagined assumption. Thus identities have been imagined where global, regional, national and local spaces have entered into relationships of replication, consequences and repercussion. Appadurai (2006) refers this phenomenon as 'geography of anger', stating that this "is one way to examine how the fear of small numbers and their power shape the mutual relationships of different spatial scales and sites" (p. 93). Thus, the concept of imagined communities and geographies lead to the concept of geography of anger, where global concerns and tensions can produce complex replicas of the larger struggles, creating "a freshly charged relationship between uncertainty in ordinary life and insecurity in the affairs of states" (Appadurai, 2006, p. 101). In other words, this imagination leads to uncertainty and identities became a flash point for insecurities, and the minorities subsequently evolve to face those circumstances.

## Building a Political Identity

The political identity of the Muslims was formed on the "anvil of Portuguese religious persecution of them as 'Moors'" (McGilvray D. B., 2008, p. 10), it was only under the British colonial regime in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in response to the prevailing British colonial model for categorising and representing indigenous Ceylonese by 'race' in the census and on the appointed Legislative Council, that the Sri Lankan Muslim elites energetically constructed their 'racial' identity as Arab descendants. It can be said that the central innovation in the period leading up to independence in 1948 was not the bifurcation of Sinhala versus Tamil political identities but the development of 'the political separation of the Ceylon Moors as a distinct ethnic group from the larger Tamil-speaking community' to ultimately distance the Muslim community from the characteristic Dravidian linguistic chauvinism but also to "safeguard their socio-political and economic interests" (Nuhman, 2007, p. 13).

What history shows is that the Muslim political elites of the South used this development to cooperate with the Sinhalese political parties, which formed the successive governments since independence to consolidate their interests (Imtiyaz, 2009). Whilst the Sri Lankan government's enthusiasm to accommodate Muslim demands helped them in their quest for a separate identity (Imtiyaz, 2012). It is no

surprise that the continuous Tamil indifference towards the Muslims and the strained political relationship between the two communities since the end of the 19th century was the real catalyst for why sections of the Muslim political leadership opposed the Tamil nationalist struggle for political autonomy and developed the full expression of political identity as an independent community (Ali, 1997).

This political expression of the Muslim identity where faith is an identity and community galvaniser has blurred boundaries with a Muslim identity based on a theological construction in which faith is a theological marker (Imtiyaz, 2012) in the sense of identifying the level of one's piety and practice of the religion. This blurring boundaries have also meant that their Muslim identity has placed them in a religious category beyond the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic and linguistic binary leading to other underlying challenges facing the identity politics of the Muslim community, particularly in the relations with the other religions in Sri Lanka. This is not about considering whether the label of one or the other is better or worse, but certainly this blurring of boundaries has meant that people from other communities are left confused as to where Muslims are and also sceptical about their 'true' belonging to the country. For example, the celebrated Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist of that time, Anagarika Dharmapala, was a leading campaigner against the Muslim presence in the country. To him, Muslims were "'aliens' and 'foreigners' and deserved to be expatriated to Arabia" (Ali, 1997, p. 260). It was felt that there was a threat to the existence of Buddhism in the country and Muslims were never part of the country and 'belonged' elsewhere. Thus, the Muslim identity became and still remains a challenge as two thirds of all Muslims live and work in Sinhala-majority parts of the island, where Muslim business people and professionals are aware of the potential of the Sinhala animosity (McGilvray D. B., 2008). One cannot underestimate this antipathy towards the Muslim community on the part of the majority of the Sinhalese Buddhist community, as incidents in 1915 and others throughout the 20th century do not only displayed the outright hostility, but also had been manifested in the formation of a political party formed by Buddhist clergy known as the *Jatika Hela Urumaya* (JHU, or National Heritage Party) that represents the most xenophobic wing of the Sri Lankan Buddhist monkhood (ICG, 2007).

O'Sullivan (1999) states that, in the context of ethnic competition, the composite Muslim identity had developed into a political force with demands for Muslim rights and Muslim development. Thus, the situation had become even more complicated with the founding of a direct Muslim political party in 1981, known as Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). The formation of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was a direct response to the vulnerability of the Muslims in the North and the East who were in need of protection from the Tamil Tiger's violence and extortion (McGilvray D. B., 2011). This was an issue which was largely ignored by the Southern Muslim politicians who were practising the politics of accommodation with the main Sinhalese political parties. The emergence of the SLMC centred in the Eastern province provided an anomaly in Muslim political representation, by challenging the strategies of the Colombo-based Muslim political elite by explicitly promoting the interests of the Muslim community as a whole, attempting to cohabit with the Sinhalese polity (Imtiyaz, 2012), developing the concept of a separate 'other' and eventually posing a "Muslim nationalist threat to the Sinhalese and the Tamils" (ICG, 2007). The SLMC also prided themselves on invoking a religious identity on top of the evolution of an ethnic identity (Johansson, 2007), shifting the centre of Muslim leadership to the east (Ameerdeen, 2006).

Though initially, the key policy issues of the SLMC were to address the security and peace in the north and east of the country, especially in guaranteeing the livelihood and security concerns of the Muslim farmers and fishermen in the north-eastern war zone (ICG, 2007). It also attempted to address the needs of Muslims living in close proximity to their Sinhalese majority neighbours in the dense urban areas of the island's south-west. Thus, the difference from other communities was that the SLMC effectively encouraged Muslim nationalism through religion, while other ethnic communities managed to execute it by language (O'Sullian, 1999) thereby emphasising the difference of 'others'.

By articulating a vivid religious identity fused with geo-political interests, it was not long before the Muslim urban elites of the south west who had previously controlled the political representation of the Muslim community were expressing concern about the potential of antagonising relationships with the Sinhala majority community. In 1990s, the SLMC started to put forward a proposal for a Muslim Self-

Governing Region (MSGR) as a means of guaranteeing the safety and rights of Muslims in the north east (McGilvray & Raheem, 2007).[3] This proposal aimed at establishing a separate Muslim 'homeland' in particular, that prompted the southern Muslims to oppose the SLMC for fear that it would lead to a Sinhala backlash (Ali, 2004).

By developing this counter narrative of a separate and distinct Muslim nationalist identity, it is also thought that this would lead the Muslim community to be on a collision course with the LTTE, which could explain their changing attitudes towards the end of the 1980s (Ali, 1997). This was especially reflected in the increasing attacks in the east as well as the expulsion of Muslims from the north. Though very little information has emerged on the LTTE's anti-Muslim pogroms and expulsions in 1990, it was obvious that these incidents did not happen in a political vacuum.

Many scholars (McGilvray, 2011; Ali, 1997; Imtiyaz, 2009; ICG, 2007) suggest that the LTTE's anti-Muslim violence in 1990 was a natural consequence of the exclusivist politics of Tamil militancy and an expression of deep seated Tamil ethnic chauvinism unleashing collective punishment for Muslim collusion with the state. Yet, it is clear that the emergence of the SLMC seriously undermined the LTTE campaign for exclusive political control in the region. "There seems to have been a concern on the part of LTTE leaders that Muslims would act as a fifth column against the insurgency in the north and east" (ICG, 2007, p. 9).

It appears that the increasing militant threat as the LTTE had strengthened their hands amidst a weakening influence from Muslim politicians in the mainstream political parties, reflecting that the SLMC emerged as a party which provides a "political voice and leadership" (Ameerdeen, 2006, p. 109) to Sri Lanka's Muslim community.

[3] The MSGR not only provided security but also political legitimacy and meant a demarcation of a separate Muslim homeland or sub-provincial unit, modelled on the idea of an autonomous power sharing unit for the Tamils which had been the subject of many debates by the government in the 80s and 90s in an attempt to deal with the LTTE issue (McGilvray & Raheem, 2007).

## Challenges for Muslim Political Leadership: A Skewed Model for Muslim Democracy

Whilst it might be easy to dismiss the behaviour of the politicians, especially the SLMC, as purely self-interest, it is clear that there are more to the conversation. In the wake of the Muslim politicians to extract benefits or commercial opportunities (not only for the community but also personally in the form of ministerial appointments), it is safe to say that the moves of the Muslim politicians, including the SLMC, were just politically oriented in order to lessen resistance (Ali, 1997; Ali, 2004; McGilvray, 2011) in the context of the Sinhala-Tamil schism and the prospect of 'otherness' in the country.

However, it became apparent since the early 1980s that this system of accommodative politics had become detrimental, especially to the interests of the east and north Muslim communities. The circumstances of community safety and security prompted a rethink of the Muslim engagement vis-à-vis politics, especially with the emergence of the SLMC which promotes the interests of the Muslim community as a whole and, at the same time, focuses on the security and well-being of the Muslim communities in the north and east. This rethink has not only meant a further division in political aims and motives but has meant that a single 'Muslim agenda' that can unify the entire Muslim electorate in the island that has proved impossible for the SLMC (or any other breakaway Muslim political parties or politicians) to forge.

The SLMC experience can be interpreted as one of the early models of 'Muslim Democracy' (Nasr, 2012), which is the phenomenon of political traditions that integrate Muslim religious values – drawn from Islamic teachings on ethics, morality, family issues, rights, social relations and so on – into political platforms designed to win regular democratic elections. The concept of Muslim Democrats has particular relevance to the SLMC whereby Muslim Democrats view political life with a pragmatic point of view with the aim of crafting viable electoral platforms and stable governing coalitions to serve individuals and collective interests within a democratic arena whose bounds they respect, win or lose (Nasr, 2012). In this sense, Nasr (2005) states that "Muslim Democrats do not seek to enshrine Islam in politics, although they do wish to harness its potential to help them win votes" (p. 14). The integration of the values should not also be viewed in the absence of the

prevailing context of that time which coincided with a steady increase of religious consciousness within the Sri Lankan Muslim society. In addition, the SLMC also succeeded in gathering support from the Muslim private sector, especially among the middle class society which felt isolated from the traditional political elites of the south. In this sense, it reflects how the emergence of Muslim Democrats was empowered by the bourgeoisie, as it combines the religious values of the middle and lower middle classes with policies that serve their economic interests (Nasr, 2005). Certainly, the early pronouncements and agenda of the SLMC points to this model. However, this is the edge where the comparison with the Muslim Democrats that Nasr (2005, 2012) talks about then ends. The concept of Muslim Democracy is more sound for Muslim-majority countries where the concepts of Islam and democracy need to interact with one another and that there is no discrepancy about the identity (either ethnic or faith) of the constituent members.

Therefore, it doesn't fully provide justice to the entire predicament faced by the Muslim community in Sri Lankan politics. In order to understand this, one has to critically investigate the origins of its problems. By identifying themselves as Muslims, the Muslim political elites (from the south and subsequently from SLMC) aims at blurring the distinctions between faith as a theological marker (i.e. a religious motivator) and faith as an identity marker (i.e. communal galvaniser). By deliberately blurring these lines, they were able to utilise it to serve their own interests to the detriment of their community. For example, it is the concept of the homogeneity of the Muslim community, through the concept of the *ummah* or the religious motivator, that Muslim political elites had contributed their parts in establishing Muslim schools or fighting for the rights of the community. However, they failed (especially those from the south) in realising the heterogeneous nature of the community, or the communal galvaniser, with regards to the threats of the security and livelihood faced by the Muslims in the north and east.

There was a lack of clear articulation and policy from the Muslim political leadership instead of choosing to move between the notions when circumstances provided. In my opinion, they would have been able to provide alternatives for communal galvanisation as well as helping to bridge the schism within the Sri Lankan society if they had properly understood their religious motivation and sought to provide solutions

within Islamic teachings. Fed with the theological motivation for justice and peace, they could have used their heterogeneous diversity to ensure that a bridge between the communities could have been built. Instead of focusing on the strength of their theological construct to articulate issues of 'deep meaning', they chose to focus on theological issues of a superficial nature such as issues of worship or law in their effort to develop a separate political identity.

In the wake of rising religious consciousness by the Muslim community, the political elite neglected the theological discussions necessary for developing identities and contextualising faith, thus, failed to provide efficient leadership. Rather, in articulating this, their sole aim of developing a separate identity has fallen prey to the global malaise afflicting Muslims, which is the push for a 'pure' Islamic identity based on a theological construct. But while taking the identity of a global community / race, they neglected local contexts and cultures. A pure community identity is a new phenomenon within Islamic teachings and was not seen in history. There are different manifestations of Islam and Muslim communities united with a pure theological marker, of which the latter is mistaken to be the identity. This had eventually led to a global concern on the issues of the rise of 'conservative' Islam.

By pushing for a new political identity, what has happened is that the doors have been opened for discussions on a religious identity that is not only foreign to Sri Lanka but fails to take its local contexts and cultures into account, causing any future discussion of post conflict reconciliation even more challenging as people feel that the Muslim community had become more isolated (linguistically, culturally and socially) than before. Thus, the main question remains here that: can a Muslim Democratic party exist in the situation of a minority where the faith identity also becomes an ethnic identity? The experience from Sri Lanka demonstrates that such a scenario is complex or at least difficult to maintain and sustain as circumstances evolve and causes change in how identities are represented.

## Reimagining Identity

Though the Muslim political elites adopted a policy of accommodation whilst ensuring their community interests were maintained, it is clear

from the anti-Muslim violence in the past few years that the effort was not enough. The bottom line is that the Sinhala-political elites and politicians had intentionally politicised Buddhism as a means to advance their political agenda in implementing disproportionate concessions to Buddhism and Sinhala-Buddhists while the ethnic and religious minorities are completely marginalised. However, it is important to note that the agenda was not entirely motivated by political intentions. In short, the political Buddhism must have been present in the society; even if within a small minority of the population. Some factors which have played significant roles in politicisation of Buddhism include the worldview of an influential segment of the Sinhala-Buddhist population, a 'nationalist' response to the westernisation, fear and anxiety of a perceived outside connections of other ethnic or religious communities. Despite this, the Muslims had undertaken a policy of accommodation, yet, somehow, this has also become a challenge to the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists as it caused insecurity in their majority and in the religiosity of their fellow countrymen.

The era after the end of the conflict in 2019 should have really been a chance to rethink ethnicity-based politics and explore a return to more inclusive politics given the fact that the circumstances had changed. It also provided an opportunity to rethink about the methods of the Muslim community represented itself vis-à-vis the others. However, the Muslim political elite has failed to recognise this shift. The political institutionalisation of the Muslim community lacks a united political front and thus, failed to grasp the opportunity in Sinhala national politics. Instead, it opted to acquire for the similar status quo of political representation and thereby had weakened the Muslims' case for more political negotiation, representation and identity. By failing to take into account of the changing nature of the community as a result of other globalising external factors, such as religious reformation, the rise of Islamophobia, a securitised agenda and also the changing nature of the country especially in post 2009, the Muslim community cannot alleviate their grievances by playing ethnic politics. This is reflected in how the Muslim politicians were not able to gather support or to influence the government of the day to completely put an end to any possible recurring violent events, such as the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, occurs in the future.

However, in the absence of any credible Muslim political leadership, the questions that were and are posed is what happens when this political influence is lost and who takes up the slack? How can Muslims get the representation for their identity? These questions are important because of the new pressures faced by the Muslim community, particularly after the end of the conflict. It was clear that the influence of the Muslim politicians had waned over time and they completely lost the previous influence.

In the gap that emerged in terms of leadership, Muslim civil society stepped in and abrogate that role to religious leaders especially as this happened in parallel to a global Islamic reformation. As faith becoming an identity that was much more fixed and almost a refuge from insecurity, which was brought about by the conflict and the subsequent identity politics, faith leaders were expected to lead and represent the Muslim community. Unfortunately, they were not equipped to handle both and only managed to emphasise religious representation and identity. The incidents in post 2009 era had exposed the weaknesses in leadership, which was unable to answer the questions being posed on religious identity and expression vis-à-vis political representation.

In addition, the incidents also displayed that the civil society and political leadership were entrenched in the past and dependent on religious leaders. Despite severe criticism of the weakness of the religious leaders, the civil society and political leadership were unable not only to provide constructive criticism (for fear of criticising religion) but also were not able to fully understand the depth and strength of the anti-Muslim movements. Instead, they opted to think in terms of a binary perspective of political manipulation without proper understanding that the polity of the day was exploiting the insecurity faced by the Muslim community. The feeling held by many within the civil society was that current leadership was to attempt and keep the ongoing accommodation politics and, by changing respective governments with another political party and then working with the new government, such violence and feelings could be avoided. Their false premise was that one Sinhala political party was better than the other and, by bringing one into power over the rest, the problems of the Muslim community will be solved. The violence of recent years effectively made such concept redundant, leading to the questions of how and where the Muslim community positioned themselves. As a result, the Muslim community faces the

serious situation at the crossroads in 2020 related to the future of Muslim identity, political survival and expression of agency.

It is clear that there is a paradox in the Muslim identity and that the Sri Lankan Muslim community is at best a complex mix of different ideologies and thought processes. Faith is not merely a theological marker (a religious motivator) but also an identity marker (a communal galvaniser), which means that tensions remain there between racial and religious identities. In defining themselves as such, the identity of the Sri Lankan Muslim community has been developed and evolved not only based on ethno-nationalist tendencies but also from theological and spiritual bases.

This duality construction of a Muslim identity has become a challenge for the Sri Lankan Muslim community as they attempt to profess their Sri Lankan identity and a sense of belonging. By identifying themselves ethnically as Muslims, politically constructed from the late 19th century, the Muslim political elites played on blurring the distinctions between faith as a theological marker (religious motivator) and faith as an identity marker (communal galvaniser). This meant that the Muslims energetically constructed their 'racial' identity as a distinct ethnic group that is founded on religious and cultural elements of their identity. They interchanged religious motivators and communal galvanisers whenever it suits them. Due to the renaissance in Islamic theological movements and thinking globally, the concept of Muslim representation in Sri Lanka evolved into theological and ideological formations on top of political representation.

This provides a challenge, with respect to the classification and representation of the Sri Lankan Muslims on the bases of an ethnic identity, even though the generic definition of a Muslim does not relate to an ethnic representation but to a religious connotation. Thus, the concept of an ethnic 'Sri Lankan Muslim' is slightly misleading and confusing as it reflects a sense of homogeneity beyond just religious practice to cultures, traditions, experiences and language which is made difficult by the heterogeneous nature of the geographical location of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, religious practices and traditions and often at odds with the concept of nationalism or the nation-state. By deliberately blurring the lines between theology and identity, the political elites were able to utilise it to serve their own interests to the

detriment of their community. Ultimately, this also caused a sense of disengagement and isolation among the Muslim community.

Hence, this identity had emerged as a double edged sword, with a negative aspect of being a minority and, at the same time, reifying an identity that is not singular and cohesive but that evolved due to the influence of global politics and a securitised lens. In the reification of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity, this process does not recognise the challenges faced by different communities, neither internally nor externally. This means that the singular point of an identity does not negotiate the lived experience and challenges of the community and communities. Thus, a real tension occurs between the reified identity (of a singular binary expression) and the lived reality of political experiences.

In other words, there has been a form of transformation, institutionalisation and politicisation of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity into a religious or ethnic identity since the colonial period where 'Islamic' became an ethnic boundary marker that was instrumentalised politically. However, this did not take neither the local nor global experiences of the Muslim communities into much consideration. This led the community to have a political identity that was also influenced from the outside but, at the same time, did not take their evolving individual identities into account. This meant that the identity did not meet its purpose and left it open to challenges.

## The Essence of the Problem

There is a lack of clear articulation and policy of identity, rather, a move between both notions of religious marker and community galvaniser are mostly followed when circumstances are provided. In the wake of rising religious consciousness by the Muslim community and by neglecting the necessary theological discussions necessary for developing identities as well as contextualising faith and failing to provide leadership in articulating this, the sole aim of developing a separate identity for the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has fallen prey to the global malaise afflicting Muslims. This had become the motivation for the Muslim community to obtain a 'pure' Islamic identity based on a theological construct and, at the same time, taking the identity of a global community

or race into consideration, while neglecting local contexts and cultures. This is considered as a new phenomenon within Islamic teachings and history because there is no such thing as a pure community identity. There are different manifestations of Islam and Muslim communities united with a pure theological marker, of which the latter is mistaken to be the identity. This confusion causes global concerns and issues of the rise of 'conservative' Islam.

By pushing for a new political identity without understanding the changing dynamics of the context, the doors have been opened for discussions on a religious identity that is not only foreign to Sri Lanka but it fails to take local contexts and cultures into account, making any future discussion of the post conflict reconciliation even more challenging. As a result, the Muslim community feels more isolated linguistically, culturally and socially than before.

## Prospects of New Solutions: Change of Narrative

According to Sen (2006), the encouragement and retention of multiple identities means that people have several enriching identities which may include nationality, gender, age and parental background, religious or professional affiliations. It is the recognition of this plurality and the search for commonalities within this pluralism that will lead to greater respect and, ultimately, understanding and acceptance. Thus, these new solutions will have to challenge people to accept diversity and create equal opportunities for diverse communities, ethnicities, traditions, cultures and faiths. Similarly, Barth (1969) claims that there is a need to possess and celebrate multiple identities and that it is problematic and reductive to limit individuals to conform to a single superordinate ethnic identity only. By reducing pluralities, there is a risk of reducing the dynamics, potential for creativity and future transformation as well as emergence of ethnic groups and identities. Thus, "if identities are always constructed, then they can also be deconstructed, perhaps even reconstructed" (Ismail Q. , 1997, p. 95). Therefore, the mainstream Sinhalese needs recognise the plurality of the nation. The minorities, on the other hand, need to rethink the concept of multiple identities and pluralism.

Thus, there is a need for a holistic re-imagination of Sri Lankan Muslim identity, expression and agency and an approach to the conversation. This includes a reimagination of the political identity and expression of the Muslim community. What we have seen with the transformation of identity in Sri Lanka amidst the shift in its political and conflict context is that political elites from the Muslim community had failed to understand the change in political context in Sri Lanka.

The experience of the political challenges of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka also raises questions about its complex political transitions, especially in post conflict scenarios, where politically active minorities have to tread a fine line in terms of balancing national and community sentiments. In politically complex transitions, politically active minorities cannot rely on block votes (as this may work temporarily) and on dividing the majority. However, this scenario is a narrow window. Thus, in order to remain active and viable, ethnic block voting needs to evolve in the way of producing another narration of identity. This new narration of identity has to consider multiple identities that also divides the majority vote. Identity is flexible and changing while minority polity also has to be flexible and evolving to respond to this issue. The process of minority block voting only works if the majority of the community is divided politically which was largely the case during the conflict in Sri Lanka. With the end of the conflict, the Sinhala community was largely aligned politically with the state, and the Muslim community concept of block voting thus became irrelevant. In other words, block voting has a shelf life and cannot be considered as a panacea for minority politics. There has to be a realisation of an evolution of politics and thinking which is also affected when politically active ethno-religious minorities have a double problem in traversing their ethnic and religious duties and principles.

Thus, the transformation of a constituency at the grassroots in the light of change in political and global contexts could undermine the legitimacy of political elites if they failed to understand, appreciate and respond appropriately to meet those challenges. The Sri Lankan Muslim community shows that though its conformation to its identity can protect the right of an ethno religious minority in the wake of political challenges, religious expression, which can lead to a homogenisation of identity and the process of the homogenisation of the political identity of the Muslim community can lead to their isolation, away from key

political debates. Therefore, a Muslim Democratic (political) party cannot exist easily in a situation of a minority where a faith identity is also part of a conversation of an ethnic identity. The experience from Sri Lanka is a complex scenario and it is very difficult to be managed as a binary expression. Hence, a recognition of the multiplicity of identities as well as a changing context at the grassroots and at the top may improve the situation.

The same happened in Sri Lanka where Muslim political elites failed to understand grassroots dynamics that is the part of a cycle that has been experienced before in the mid-1980s. Consequently, the formation of the SLMC took place as elites from the south failed to understand the security concerns of the eastern Muslims and, thus, it was perceived that the eastern Muslims needed their own separate party to look after their interests. Similar event occurred again in 2009, when ethnic politics lost their legitimacy after the conflict and the dynamics of the community changed at the grassroots. From being largely a divided polity during the conflict, the Sinhala majority community became 'united' at the end of the conflict which emboldened extreme nationalists and, thereby, weakening the Muslim polity. The root of problem also underwent a change in its context as the political context has changed. In other words, at the societal level, the Sinhala-Muslim relations did not improve after the conflict and, in fact, exposed all the weaknesses and fractures that had so far been masked by the conflict and the focus perhaps on the Sinhala-Tamil relations. During the conflict, the Sinhalese forgot about their relations with the Muslims and the Muslims were naively and blissfully ignorant in developing their identity and expression. This was exposed and exploited by the extreme Sinhala nationalists after 2009 which led to the violent incidents in 2014, 2017 and 2018. However, the Muslim political elites did not reflect this bottom up change in community dynamics and the emergent of the nationalist mainstream politics. The Muslim community, also being led by political and religious dynamics, failed to appreciate these dynamics as well. Lewer and Ismail (2011) allude to this when they talked about the next steps for the Muslim community in the east of Sri Lanka as a three pronged approaches of Muslim political thought: how in the east the Muslim polity engages with their Tamil counterparts; how these regional politics renogitiates a position with the government of Sri Lanka and the central perspective; and the politics that stands for a more nationalistic solution.

Therefore, the three pronged approaches of Muslim political thought has to consider the changing context and an evolution of the community in terms of influences and externalities. Although there were some attempts to do away with the ethnic nationalist politics by the founder of the SLMC such as the formation of another party with Sinhala parties to get the Muslims back to mainstream politics, such attempts were short-lived and unsuccessful. Then what is the strategy for a nationalistic solution? Part of the solution starts from a rethinking around collective mobilising for addressing community concerns is undertaken. The type of political engagement which has been seen in the past decade is no longer the way forward for the Muslim community.

According to Anderson (1983), the Muslim community had succeeded in becoming an 'imagined' political community based on an 'imagined geography' that disregards the majority of the other inhabitants within the nation and reproduces their imaginations with cultural roots. However, they had underestimated the ethnic confrontation with the Pan-Islamic influences that would result the temporal and spatial dynamics of religious expression, especially by Islamic reformism in the late 1970s. Hence, there was a perfect storm as the global Pan-Islamic reformism coincided with the search for the Muslims in Sri Lanka in order to establish a separate identity in the face of the conflict and attempting to develop an expression for themselves which is separate from the 'other'. This was seized upon by the Muslim elites in Sri Lanka who somehow did not fully understand that this would have a life of its own and evolve. With Pan-Islamic influences, there became a preoccupation with looking internally as opposed to considering the external message of reform that is at the heart of the original Islamic message, that is changing the society for the better. The lack of synergy between the practices through which Muslim society is transformed and energised as well as the practices of society at large exhibited by these reform groups. Yet, the meeting point between the language of the piety movement and the demands of social expression for ethnic representations in the larger Sri Lankan context was completely missing. The reification of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity assumes the homogeneity of identity without recognising the diversity of individual communities and identities.

## Recalibrating the Premise

The premise of the reimagining of the Muslim political identity in Sri Lanka has to be one where Islamic reformism in piety and theology makes sense in: (1) recognising the diversity and homogeneity of the Muslim community; (2) guiding an ethnic and local agency and expression whereby, cultural practices and traditions are enhanced instead of being replaced by theology; (3) obtaining greater justice against discriminations and; (4) defending civil responsibilities and the democratic processes, restoring the dignity of conscience and human values (Ramadan, 2004). From this perspective, Muslim political representatives and political party (or even a reformist group) who define themselves with guidelines from the Qur'an and Islamic principles, should have focus on conveying honesty and incorruptibility. With grassroots support, it has used those same principles towards building an identity and relations with other communities by emphasising an ethical system and orientation that promotes social justice through equal rights and opportunities.

The reimagination of the community identity has to include reassessment of what the Muslim community represents and ultimately identifies with. In its evolution, it had undertaken a number of different forms of identity as it sought to carve a place in Sri Lanka. However, it is clear from the recent anti-Muslim violence that the community is now at a crossroad. The role that they carved out for themselves depends on them being seen as part of the solution and not as an additional problem. This comes back to the fact that they need to articulate a comprehensive and an inclusive platform and identity based on their Islamic principles of ethics. The community cannot shed its religious label and, thus, a reassessment of the identity needs to begin with an appropriate understanding of how one approaches Islamic reformation.

The concept of piety and spirituality needs to be segregated from the political reality of identity expression. Therefore, the premise is that one can be a good political Muslim and a bad spiritual Muslim: one can practice the spiritual aspects of Islam, become a 'practicing' Muslim but a bad political representative. However, this issue should not be too prescriptive in merely relating the Muslims in Sri Lanka with spirituality and piety.

There is a need for a reassessment of the identity of the Muslim community (and beyond). Muslims in Sri Lanka are not homogenous but heterogeneous and are made of multiple identities. They had emerged and evolved and, although they are linked with religion, they are spiritually different and need to work on that to ensure some better relationships.

The gist is that the Muslim community can neither be ignored nor marginalised (by either the Tamil or the Sinhala polity) when considering the future of Sri Lanka in a post-conflict scenario. However, the role that they carved out for themselves depends on how they are seeing themselves as part of the solution instead of an additional problem. This comes back to the fact that they need to articulate a comprehensive and an inclusive platform and identity, based on their Islamic principles of ethics. Their part in reconciliation and forgiveness based from their Islamic references is vital.

However, Sri Lankan Muslim community cannot afford to be politically naive and needs to develop a sophisticated argument and agenda. Due to the global concern on the rise of conservative Islam, it is easy to conflate terminology and ideology with radicalisation, violent extremism and potential conflicts. In this case, Muslims, especially those who are living in areas where Sinhalese are the majority and who have legitimate grievances, need to pay attention. While Muslims are aware of the challenges they are facing, they have to be able to understand their failure and its consequences. Thus there is a need of a realisation of that exclusive social practices and values practiced among the Muslims have to be curtailed. This allows the beginning of a potential conversation in ensuring that tensions can be alleviated.

## Conclusion

Attempts at redefining politics and religion are not useful in Sri Lanka mainly due to the interconnectedness between the two identities. I argue that in Islam, ethnic and politics are intertwined and constitute a different perspective that creates a political or ethno or religious representation. This is definitely different from traditional approach towards the classification in which religion, ethnicity and politics are understood as fixed and separate. Instead, we needed to examine: (1)

how a hybrid of these representations are done? (2) how should the boundaries between these concepts are resolved? and; (3) what factors cause these movements and its implications? The way forward needs to be about a re-imagination of what the Muslim community is, represents and, ultimately, identifies with. It needs to include reassessment on how well the community manage the formation of attitude towards 'other' ethnicities and practices adopted to mitigate negative attitudes. In this regard, much work is needed by the Muslim community to done towards possible behavioural change in order to experience 'other' communities. Muslims had struggled and still continue to struggle to articulate their grievances from the conflict in a manner that brings confidence to the other two parties of a sincerity of goals for the benefit of the whole country and in a manner that perhaps changes the current misconceptions regarding Muslims' place in the conflict. However, the role that they carved out for themselves depends on how they portray themselves as part of the solution instead of an additional problem. This comes back to the fact that they need to articulate a comprehensive and inclusive platform and identity it based on their Islamic principles of ethics. This is one of the antidotes that can neutralise the advances of a minority of the Sinhala Buddhist extremists.

The Muslim community was caught between a rock and a hard place. Undoubtedly, their future prospects could be based on their lessons from the past, but the past should not become a ball and chain for the future. The Muslim politicians had made some mistakes in developing a separate identity. Their naivety and quest for political representation obscured the gains that could have been made for the country. Due to the current increase in religious consciousness of the community, which blurs the lines between religious and ethnic identities, the Muslim community faces many challenges for a sense for representation and identification. Any movement forward needs to articulate a common space for all of these representations to take place.

Therefore, the Muslim community needs to move forward by reassessing their current circumstances. Sri Lanka suffered its worst suicide bombing attack with the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks on churches and hospitals. Carried out by locals who belong to a Muslim terror group aligned with the Islamic State, the scale of the attacks not only shocked the global community but its aftermath had caused unnecessary scrutiny on the Muslim community. Though the latter was

quick to respond and distance themselves from the acts of violence, they are now under scrutiny in terms of their identity and actions. The ramifications of the Easter Sunday attack are that that the Muslim community is under pressure to 'respond' and 'reform' according to the concerns of others towards their conservative religious practices and identity. The current COVID-19 phase had brought renewed scrutiny on the Muslim community. The accommodation politics that the Muslim polity had hitherto been employing has probably now disappeared and they will have to employ if not forced to go through a different type of relationship. As the Muslim community being securitised, they are expected to change their visible identity and their expressions of religious practices as well as how they define themselves vis-à-vis the other communities and within the country. How this manifests itself depends on how proactive the community and polity are versus how much they react to different situations. The four phases described above could serve as a starting point for that conversation as the nation seeks a way towards healing. It is clear that the narrative of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists will become more prominent and hence, the minorities will now need to acquiesce even more.

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