

# The 2018 Political Crisis and Muslim Politics in Sri Lanka

Andreas Johansson

## Executive Summary

*The Sri Lankan political crisis of 2018 kicked off with sitting President Maithripala Sirisena sacking Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe and replacing him with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The political culture of the country was paralyzed by Sirisena's drastic move. The biggest Muslim political party, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) sided with Wickramasinghe. One of the reasons for the siding with Wickramasinghe was out of fear that Rajapaksa's return would bring back the anti-Muslim sentiments in the country. The SLMC also fears that Rajapaksa might once again bring in a Sinhala nationalistic agenda into political discourse. But the SLMC's choice has consequences. SLMC leaders, along with other Muslim political leaders, are now forced to navigate different Muslim categories that they themselves have introduced when choosing political sides. Muslims in Sri Lanka are defined in different ways, including, for example, through linguistic belonging or belonging to a religious sect. In the last decades, however, the dominant definition among the Muslim political elite has been belonging to the religious community of Islam. Yet the new political conflict may revive an old definition of Muslims in Sri Lanka, based on the Tamil language, which they share with other religious groups. Thus, after years of Muslim political leaders trying to distance themselves from other Tamil-speaking groups (Hindus and Christians), Muslims once again might turn to a bigger Tamil alliance in their bid to balance the blossoming Sinhalese nationalistic tendency in the country.*

## Introduction

In late 2018, Sri Lanka was stunned by a new political crisis when the sitting President Maithripala Sirisena sacked the Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe and appointed the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as his replacement.<sup>1</sup> Sirisena's political move sparked a constitutional crisis, leaving the country with two claimants to the position as prime minister. Sirisena threatened to abolish the parliament once he realized that his decision to sack Wickramasinghe was not backed by a parliamentary majority. The political crisis led to protests all over Sri Lanka. Supporters from different political sides clashed; one person died in these clashes. Supporters of Wickramasinghe stated that they feared a bloodbath and called upon the international community to act on what they considered an anti-democratic coup.<sup>2</sup> Sirisena had many reasons to sack Wickramasinghe: Wickramasinghe did not agree with the economic politics of the country; he was accused of corruption; and Rajapaksa is still very popular among the majority Sinhalese community in the country. The return of

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Sri Lanka Braces for Protest over PM's Sacking', 30 October 2018.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/sri-lanka-braces-for-protest-over-pms-sacking/articleshow/66426096.cms>. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

<sup>2</sup> 'Sri Lanka: As Constitutional Crisis Triggers Fears of 'Bloodbath', Concern Mounts for Minorities', 30 October 2018. <https://theconversation.com/sri-lanka-as-constitutional-crisis-triggers-fears-of-bloodbath-concern-mounts-for-minorities-105990>. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

Rajapaksa to political power worries the minority groups in Sri Lanka. During Rajapaksa's presidency, politicians of the minority communities often spoke out against his nationalistic Sinhalese agenda. When Rajapaksa lost the 2015 presidential election, commentators observed that he lost because he lost the Muslim vote. So Muslims clearly have an important political role to play in Sri Lanka. But who are the Muslims of Sri Lanka? What has been their political agenda in the past, present, and what will it be in the near future?

## Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka

To understand the present, we need to look at the history of Muslims in Sri Lanka. Muslims make up approximately 9.7 per cent of the total population in the country.<sup>3</sup> But the census in Sri Lanka divides the Muslim population in different categories based on language (in which are included Malays and Tamil Moors) and belonging to sects within the Muslim community (such as Memons and Bohras). Muslim communities in Sri Lanka are thus divided along linguistically and sectarian axes. However, almost 100 per cent of Muslims in Sri Lanka are Sunni. The complexity and diversity of Muslims in Sri Lanka is hard to analyze and understand, but for the purpose of analytical clarity, I describe Muslims in Sri Lanka during the last decades as belonging to three common categories.

The first category is the Tamil language. Most Muslims in Sri Lanka speak Tamil. This category connects Muslims with the other Tamil-speaking populations in the country, which includes Hindus, Christians and Muslims. The definition of Muslims as Tamils has sometimes been a controversial question. This definition was more commonly accepted in the past. After the independence in 1948 tensions between the Tamil-speaking minorities and the Sinhala majority population started to grow, in large part owing to the Sinhala Only Act that started to take shape in 1956. The Act made Sinhalese the only official language in the country. The Tamil-speaking communities in Sri Lanka felt discriminated and, in response, started to organize themselves politically. In the 1970s Tamils voiced separatist ideas and formed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). The tension between the Sinhalese and Tamils turned into civil war in 1983. Muslims were tied to the Tamil-speaking community and shared a common interest with it in the 1980s: Both wanted to preserve Tamil as an official language in the country. Thus Muslims joined different Tamil political and militant organizations during this time. For example, the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF) joined forces with the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and supported its politics. However, in the mid 1980s, this shared Tamil identity between Muslims and Tamil communities started to change. One reason for that change was the formation of the political party the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). The SLMC was founded based on religious affinity and not language.<sup>4</sup> The SLMC also managed to attract more Muslim voters than any other movement before it. The SLMC was voted into the parliament in 1989. The bond between the Tamil-speaking communities was

---

<sup>3</sup> Dennis B. McGilvray, (2015). 'Sri Lanka'. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THIRD Edition. Retrieved December 5, 2015, from <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/sri-lanka-COM\\_27597](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/sri-lanka-COM_27597)>.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Johansson, (2016). *Pragmatic Muslim Politics – The Case of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress*. Lund: Media Tryck.

broken after this development, and after the LTTE had forced approximately 75,000 Muslims to move out of the northern part of the country in 1990.<sup>5</sup>

Certain political events have helped shape a “unified” Muslim political voice over the years. The second categorization is something that is commonly used by Sri Lankan Muslims when they describe why there are Muslims. It is the story about Muslim traders that came to the island in the 7<sup>th</sup> century for business.<sup>6</sup> These traders started to marry local Tamil women and settle down in the country. Muslims in Sri Lanka thus claim that they belong to a “racial” category stemming from the Middle East. This narrative is strengthened by the fact that Muslims were, and to some extent still are, heavily involved in trade businesses in the country. During the colonial period Portugal and the Netherlands put restraints on Muslim trade businesses, while Great Britain was more tolerant.<sup>7</sup>

The third category that is used in describing Muslims in Sri Lanka is based on belonging to the religion of Islam. This categorization is connected to the second one. So one category that has been used since the 1970s is simply that of “Muslim”. Before the 1970s the term “Moor” was used more frequently. However the impact of so called *da’wa* organizations (missionary groups) in the late 1970s made Muslim a more common word to describe Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. These *da’wa* movements came primarily from the Indian subcontinent and with them the notion of a global Muslim *umma* (nation) spread throughout the country. A lot of mosques and Arabic colleges were built at this time, many funded by Middle Eastern countries.<sup>8</sup> The paradox here seems to be that these *da’wa* groups’ goal to unify Muslims also led to violence and tensions between Sufi and “orthodox” Muslim groups. This is yet another example of how diversified the Muslims in Sri Lanka are.<sup>9</sup>

## Impact on the Coming Election

All these different categorizations of Muslims in Sri Lanka have one thing in common: they all define Muslims as a minority. It is in this light we have to understand the Muslim political elites’ role in the 2018 political crisis. Just like Muslims in Sri Lanka are a diverse community, the political Muslim leadership also has different agendas. The biggest Muslim political party, SLMC and its leader Rauff Hakeem, has stood against Sirisena’s act of bringing back Rajapaksa as Prime Minister. However, because the SLMC has worked together with Rajapaksa before, there is a slim chance that they will do so again, for multiple reasons.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sharika Thiranagama, (2011). *In My Mother’s House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>6</sup> A.M. Muhammed Shukri, (1986). *Muslims of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Aitken Spence Printing.

<sup>7</sup> Ameer Ali, (1986). ‘Muslim Participation in the Export Sector of Sri Lanka 1800–1915’. In A.M. Muhammed Shukri (ed), *Muslims of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Aitken Spence Printing.

<sup>8</sup> Meghan O’Sullivan (1999). *Identity and Institution in Ethnic Conflict: The Muslims of Sri Lanka*. Ph.D. Thesis, Oxford: Oxford University.

<sup>9</sup> For a wider discussion on Muslim Identity see Dennis B McGilvray, (2016) “Rethinking Muslim Identity in Sri Lanka.” John C. Holt, (ed), *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*. Oxford University Press.

When I interviewed Hakeem in 2013, he pointed out that land grabbing was the most important issue for Muslims in Sri Lanka:

That is land and land distribution in every sector we have to fight for. (...) they make it out as it is for the common good stating that it is not for the common good, instead Sinhalese are getting land. (...) we are trying to address this within the government so the community will not get affected (...) of such policies (...). So the guys in the national security cannot go ahead and to enquire land and set up this camp here all and this, (...) but we put it across in such way that as being, showing, that security won't be compromised. In the name of installing security installation they can't take away our legitimate right to land. In many areas, even livelihood issues we have the same problem and in dividing policies (...) when it comes to declaring forest land (...) the policies are sometime not being applied in a even handed matter, you see, sometimes when it comes to the minorities the policies seems to very strictly being in forced, whereas there is a different attitude when it comes to the majority communities.<sup>10</sup>

There is a belief within the Muslim political leadership of the SLMC that Muslims are traditional landowners (in the east) and that, under Rajapaksa's presidency, the Sinhala colonization of the east and the north was discussed among the minorities. This is connected to a wider Sinhala agenda that Rajapaksa and his family are accused of, namely having a connection to the Sinhala nationalistic and Buddhist organization Bodu Bala Sena (BBS).<sup>11</sup> BBS is still an active voice in Sri Lanka, but they were more active during the years of Rajapaksa, mainly targeting Muslims. BBS follows the global populist agenda that is targeting Muslims. In their rhetoric, you will find arguments like "the Muslim community is growing in Sri Lanka" and taking over the country. Other arguments like "Muslims in Sri Lanka are supporting terrorist in South Asia and the Middle East" are also common. BBS has arranged protests against Muslims. At least two of these protests have had a deadly outcome with the death of Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Besides its direct connections to BBS the Rajapaksa regime is also accused by the Muslim political leadership of not doing anything about BBS and their hate speech against Muslims. I would argue that the Muslim political leadership in the country sees a direct connection between BBS and Rajapaksa, and that this perception is important for understanding why the Muslim political parties will not openly support Rajapaksa, or any other member of his family in their bid for leading political positions in the country.

As discussed above, Muslims in Sri Lanka have identified themselves through three different categories during the last decades. While Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s tried to distance themselves from other Tamil speaking-communities, we might see more and more

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Rauff Hakeem in 2013-02-23. Full interview is published in the authors PhD-thesis, see Andreas Johansson, (2016). *Pragmatic Muslim Politics – The Case of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress*. Lund: Media Tryck

<sup>11</sup> 'Gotabhaya Rajapaksa And His Bala Sena', 14 March 2013.

<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/gotabhaya-rajapaksa-and-his-bala-sena/>. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> 'Violent Buddhist Extremists are Targeting Muslims in Sri Lanka', 26 April 2018.

<https://theconversation.com/violent-buddhist-extremists-are-targeting-muslims-in-sri-lanka-92951>. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

collaborations between these minority groups going forward. We can today see tendencies that Muslims identify themselves with the category of Tamil-speaking communities. For example, in 2017, Tamils and Muslims together “demanded release of land occupied by the military”.<sup>13</sup> The joint protest against the military also expressed distress concerning the people that disappeared during the civil war, and concerning jobs for those affected by the war.<sup>14</sup> The SLMC leader Hakeem also reflects this distress in the quote above. Another example of Muslims siding with other minorities in the country are debate articles written by Muslim intellectuals. A good example of the ideas in such articles is Dr. Ameer Ali’s article in *Colombo Telegraph* entitled “The Tamils and Muslims Must Realise That They as National Minorities Cannot Find Lasting Solutions to Their Problems by Fighting Alone”.<sup>15</sup> However, since the Muslim political elite has been enforcing the political agenda of Muslims based on religious belonging to a global *umma*, it might be hard for everyday people to recognize this renewed idea of an identity based on a shared language. But what is certain is that the Muslim political elite will counter Sirisena’s flirt with Sinhala nationalism with any means necessary.

. . . . .

Andreas Johansson is the director of the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET). He can be contacted at andreas.johansson@sasnet.lu.se. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

---

<sup>13</sup> ‘Sri Lankan Tamil, Muslim Political Parties Protest Against the Military’, 27 April 2017. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/FXhrKxZgQfkOQMyYgljLHN/Sri-Lankan-Tamil-Muslim-political-parties-protest-against-t.html>. Accessed on 10 December 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Simmering Mistrust In Tamil-Muslim Politics’, 11 January 2018. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/simmering-mistrust-in-tamil-muslim-politics/>. Accessed on 10 December 2018.