

## **Resignation of Muslim Politicians: A Socio-political Setback in Sri Lanka**

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### **Summary**

*The mass resignations of Muslim politicians have cast a spotlight on the fragility of inter-communal relations in Sri Lanka. Healing from the Easter Sunday attacks has suffered a socio-political setback.*

This year's Eid-ul-Fitr Muslim festival has been a bleak affair for Sri Lanka's Muslims in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings. This eventually culminated in 11 Sri Lankan Muslim politicians – nine ministers and two provincial governors – resigning collectively on 3 June 2019.

The abrupt en masse resignation was an act of solidarity with Industry and Commerce Minister Rishad Bathiudeen who is accused of abetting the terrorists behind the deadly attacks.

The mounting political and social pressures in the past couple of weeks have severely tested the inter-communal relations in Sri Lanka. First, the political opposition moved a no-confidence motion against Bathiudeen, accusing him of 10 charges, including pressuring the military to release suspects involved in the attacks.

Second, a Buddhist monk, Athuraliye Rathana, held a 'death fast' to demand the removal of Bathiudeen and two Muslim provincial governors. Belonging to a right-wing nationalist party, Rathana serves as a parliamentarian and an adviser to Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena.

Despite the accusers not producing any concrete evidence to support their allegations, their demands managed to galvanise demonstrations in major cities. For instance, a crowd of 10,000 people gathered near Sri Dalada Maligawa temple, outside of which Rathana was also fasting for four days. As this temple is an important pilgrimage site for Sri Lankan Buddhists, Rathana was decidedly strategic in holding his fast in that vicinity so as to mobilise public opinion and strike a chord with like-minded supporters.

The General Secretary of the nationalist Bodu Bala Sena organisation, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, echoed similar demands without providing any hard evidence either. In May 2019, he was pardoned by Sirisena despite being accused of inciting anti-Muslim violence and charged with contempt of court.

These vague allegations, albeit perhaps done on impulse, could be driven by opportunistic tendencies of local ethno-nationalists. They may want a more entrenched communal system

that would prioritise the needs and interests of the Sinhalese majority above those of minority communities in Sri Lanka.

Prior to the resignations, there were four Muslims in the current cabinet. In particular, Kabir Hashim and Rauff Hakeem helmed key ministries and are influential Muslim politicians. Hashim was General Secretary of the United National Party while Hakeem is leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress.

Tellingly, the then President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, appointed three Muslim ministers to his cabinet in 2005. During the protracted civil war, Muslim politicians used their clout to convince the community to oppose the Tamil separatist agenda and support the government. Those who lived near zones controlled by Tamil Tigers were instrumental in providing intelligence to the military.

After the war, Muslim leaders continued to play a pivotal role by alerting the intelligence agencies on rising militancy influenced by Wahhabism exported from the Middle East. They cautioned Sri Lankan authorities on the National Thowheed Jamath, the main group behind the Easter attacks. The repeated warnings from Sri Lankan Muslims illustrate that they belong to a law-abiding and peace-loving community which practises a moderate form of Islam that rejects the austere Wahhabi ideology.

The heterogeneous Muslim community, the majority being Tamil-speaking Moors, has worked hard to ensure that their members do not get indoctrinated by radical ideas, disassociated themselves from radical-extremist groups, and denounced the deadly Easter attacks as being un-Islamic. Muslims are not only vital assets towards combatting terrorism, but are also key to promoting interfaith dialogue that can curb extremism, reduce religious violence and bring faith groups together.

Having no Muslim representatives in the government, a first for Sri Lanka since its independence in 1948, undermines the social fabric of Sri Lanka's multicultural society. Minority representation in politics can strengthen the role of representational associations, encourage political membership and bridge the gap between a minority community and the government dominated by a majority. All the more so when minorities like Muslims have been targets of sectarian hatred or violence, as increasingly witnessed in Sri Lanka.

On why the Muslim politicians decided to tender their resignations collectively, one plausible reason could be Muslim brotherliness by lending support to those who were pressured to resign. Another is to send a strong message to the government that it has not done enough to protect the Muslim community from reprisals. Indeed, the Easter bombings have boded ill for Sri Lankan Muslims in the form of hate speeches and mobs attacking Muslim-owned shops and houses. Islamophobia has risen exponentially since the terror attacks and these resignations can be viewed as scapegoating Muslims.

At a time when closing communal ranks is imperative for Sri Lanka to bounce back from a terror attack, these resignations constitute a domestic political setback for restoring social harmony. The Muslims of Sri Lanka are critical assets and effective antidotes toward battling

terrorism, thus making it prudent for the government to get them on their side by protecting them against Islamophobic backlashes.

But the resignations are also not the solution to the problem. Rather, the Sri Lankan Muslim political leaders and others in government ought to cooperate on the basis of mutual trust and respect. They need to give in unison their undivided attention to beef up the country's national security intelligence infrastructure, institute a de-radicalisation programme, and establish a nationwide inter-religious organisation to promote interfaith dialogue. Bowing to exclusionary and discriminatory demands of ethno-nationalists are counterproductive to building a resilient and harmonious society in Sri Lanka.

As a matter of urgency, the current Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena needs to exhibit strong leadership to rise above ethno-nationalist politics and negotiate the swift return of the 11 Muslim politicians, chiefly the four Muslim cabinet ministers to their portfolios. Right now, these resignations are a case of one step forward, two steps back in efforts to reconstruct a more united and stronger Sri Lanka in South Asia.

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