

# SRI LANKA'S ETHNIC WAR: THE MUSLIM DIMENSION

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**T**he massacre of nearly 160 innocent Muslim men, women and children in the Polonnaruwa District of Sri Lanka during the early hours of 15 October 1992, is the latest in a series of dastardly and horrific acts perpetrated by the warring factions in the island. Whether the latest butchery was masterminded by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as popularly attributed by the government and the public of Sri Lanka, but denied, though unconvincingly, by the LTTE high Command or by the Sri Lankan Army itself as counteraccused by the LTTE, the fact of the matter is that the Muslim community has now been compelled to devise its own means of self protection against any future aggression. The demand by certain Muslim groups for the creation of a Muslim unit within the Sri Lankan armed forces, and the cry for arms and ammunition by the Muslim youth, to confront the aggressors, are becoming increasingly louder and if the present circumstances remain static, it will make their demand even more irresistible to satisfy. It is easy for any group to take up arms, but difficult to put them down. Violence has its own momentum of growth, as history has demonstrated time and time again.

The current ethnic war in Sri Lanka and the issues involved in it have been discussed and decided in the past simply as a bipartite conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. Although the origins of this conflict may validate such a stance, the nature of the civil war today and the extent of its escalation which has clearly spread beyond the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic boundary and into the Muslim communal arena, has made the confrontation at least tripartite and the issues more complex. It is unfortunate that the Muslim dimension of this conflict has not received sufficient attention in the international media. Having been, until recently, a community of innocent bystanders who invariably got caught in the Sinhalese-Tamil crossfire, the Muslims, particularly those living in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka, are now forcibly dragged into the strife and are compelled to take a decisive stand and bear the consequences of their choice. Though not directly comparable to either the Bosnian or the Palestinian agony, the tragedy of the Sri Lankan Muslims is worsening day by day and may soon deteriorate to reach a parallel phenomenon.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka, known as the Moors since the days of Portuguese colonization in the 16th century, form

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nearly seven percent of the island's population and count over a million in number. Although they are an ubiquitous community, more than one-third of them live in the Tamil region and of this, an overwhelming majority is concentrated in the Eastern Province. Their presence is now viewed by the Tamil fighters as a hurdle to the Tamil cause of an independent Eelam but welcomed by the government as a blessing to its anti-Eelam propaganda and military manoeuvres.

Until the middle of the latter half of the eighties, the Tamil leadership, including the Tamil Tigers, accommodated Muslims into its ethnic group, under a broadly defined category of Tamil speaking people. In fact, the Tigers went a step further and called the Muslims Islamic Tamils, thereby emphasizing that the Muslims of Sri Lanka are ethnically of Tamil origins. The fact that a vast majority of the Muslims spoke Tamil as their mother-tongue and that a great proportion of them have historical patrilineal connections with Tamil Nadu, made it imperative for the Tamil leaders not to leave out the Muslims from the former's struggle for Tamil rights. The Federal Party in the fifties and sixties fielded Muslim candidates in all the parliamentary elections and even the militant Tamil groups in the eighties recruited Muslim youths to their armed brigades and promoted the dedicated amongst them to higher ranks.

The bulk of the Muslims however could not and did not place absolute trust on the Tamil leadership. Those who contested and won elections under the Federal Party ticket later crossed over to other national parties and a number of Muslim youth who were recruited by the Tamil militants, later deserted their leaders and severed their connections with the Tamil cause altogether.

This popular mistrust of the Muslims dates back to the early days of the present century. For instance, in the 1915 racial riots, when the Muslims were attacked and killed by the Sinhalese rabble, and when Muslim shops were looted and their property destroyed by Sinhalese thugs, the Tamil leader then, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan not only pulled his community to the side of the Sinhalese but even led a delegation to the British monarch on behalf of the Sinhalese and appeared in the court of law to plead against the Muslims. In the forties when the struggle for Pakistan was injecting communal bitterness in India, it had its parallel repercussions in the Tamil-Muslim relations in Sri Lanka too. And in the fifties at a time when the Tamils were dominating the country's senior administrative positions, the Muslims were systematically discriminated against in public



examinations and government appointments. Such episodes and other such, made the Muslims skeptical of the Tamil leaders and encouraged them to ally with the Sinhalese at moments of crisis .

There were other factors too which favored this alliance. The island-wide distribution of Muslim demography, the parliamentary system of government of the Westminster model- until its abolition in the late seventies - and the racial politics of the country provided the Muslim leaders with a golden opportunity to play politics with the so-called national parties and arrest thereby the socio-economic and cultural degradation of the Muslims. Using the religious banner of Islam as the rallying point, these leaders, who traditionally hailed from the affluent families of Colombo and its surroundings, became the unchallenged spokesmen of Muslim interests.

At times of momentous decisions in the national legislature, such as when, the Ceylon Citizenship Bill, which disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of Tamil plantation workers in the island; the Sinhala Only Act, which deprived the Tamil language of equal status in the country; and the University Entrance Examination Standardization Scheme, which removed the competitive edge hitherto enjoyed by the Tamil Colleges in the North; were introduced, the Muslim leaders rendered their total support to the governments of the time. In return for this support, the governments of the day bestowed upon the Muslim community certain favours and privileges which, in the eyes of the Tamil politicians, were deliberate attempts by the state to oppress the Tamil community. The Muslim leaders on the other hand claimed that these gains were their community's legitimate share of the nation's developmental benefits. " Divided they/we (the Sinhalese and Tamils) swim, and united they/we sink" was the theme of one of the Muslim leaders in the country in the sixties.

Every thing looked rosy to the Muslims until the end of the seventies after which two changes shattered the political calculations of the community. One was the system of proportional representation introduced by the Jayawardena constitution and, the other was the cry for an independent Tamil Eelam backed by the armed struggle of the Tamil youth.

The all-powerful Presidential system introduced by the former President J.R.Jayewardene and his proportional representation scheme, put an end to the past Muslim strategy of "divide and swim" and instead compelled their leaders to become the virtual slaves of a political party if they were to be counted as deserving nominees to the national legislature. The armed struggle of the Tamils on the other hand forced the Muslims of the North and East to look for a new stratagem to protect their interests but without isolating themselves from their counterparts in other provinces. The decision to establish Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

(S.L.M.C), and the recruitment of Muslims to the National Home Guards, a paramilitary force equipped with light weaponry supplied by the government, were two devices born to meet the changed circumstances of the community. In retrospect however, these moves appear shortsighted and blameworthy for much of the present tragedy.

The philosophy behind the formation of the S.L.M.C. was to rally the Muslim voters under its umbrella, enter the legislature as the sole representative of the Muslim community and then to bargain with the rival Sinhalese parties for more favours and privileges. Just like Mr.Thondaman, the leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress, who speaks for the Indian Tamils because of the majority support he commands amongst them, the leader of the S.L.M.C. Mr.Ashraff assumed that he and his party would also emerge as the sole voice of the Muslim community. On the contrary, the appearance of the S.L.M.C. in the political horizon, exposed for the first time that the so called unity of the Muslims under the religious banner is only a superficial image and beneath that banner there are real issues which encourage centrifugalism. For one thing, the traditional Muslim leadership from Colombo was not prepared to surrender its hegemony to Mr.Ashraff, a political upstart from the Eastern Province. And in addition, the interests of the Muslims who are living in the Sinhalese areas are fundamentally different from those of the Northern and Eastern province Muslims. While the vast majority of the Tamil district Muslims are farmers and landless peasants, those living in the Sinhalese areas are mostly petty businessmen, artisans and urban workers. Linguistically too the cleavage between the two groups is widening. In the past, all or a vast majority of the Muslims spoke Tamil as their mother tongue. Now, after the government's language policy came into operation, the younger generation of Muslims in the Sinhalese districts has lost its roots in the Tamil language and adopted Sinhalese as their main tongue. At the same time the Muslims of the North and East hardly have any fluency in Sinhala and consequently the Muslims have become a divided community linguistically. This sad trend is certain to increase in the future.

Although the S.L.M.C. registered a substantial number of Muslim votes in the General Elections of 1989 it won only four seats and entered parliament with a strength far below its expectations. Given the economic and linguistic divisions within the Muslims [the S.L.M.C.], it will be far-fetched for the S.L.M.C. to become the spokesman for the entire community. Even as a regionally based, ethnic party, some of its policies have deepened the discord between the Tamils and Muslims and have contributed significantly to the present cycle of violence between the two communities in the North and East.

The S.L.M.C's political platform in the Tamil areas, was originally structured on the demand for a separate



Regional Council for the Muslims in the East. While the Tamil Eelamists were demanding a permanent merger of the North and East the S.L.M.C. demanded the status quo to remain permanently. Without studying the operational logistics of a separate Muslim Regional Council and (without) understanding the demographic difficulties which such a council administration would encounter, the S.L.M.C. demand became an additional propaganda weapon to the government's anti-Eelam policy. Through systematic manipulation of the Muslim position, the government had determined to drive the Muslims on a collision course with the Tamils. On the spot reports by independent observers confirm that the government had a hand in the Tamil-Muslim riots which broke out in the late eighties in the Eastern Province. The outcome of all this is that the Muslims, from being a community of innocent bystanders in the historical Sinhala-Tamil rivalry, have now become on the one hand, an obstacle to the Tamil cause - which the Tamil militants are determined to remove at any cost - and on the other, a convenient pawn in the hands of the government which is prepared to sacrifice them to achieve a final victory. Under the guise of Home Guards, Muslim youths have been recruited and armed by the government and (have been) allowed to confront the Tamil army whenever the latter enter Muslim villages.

The consequences of these politically shortsighted measures are too painful to recount. A whole community of innocent Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar in the North have been driven out by the Tamil army - as the Palestinians were by the Israeli's- and are now living as refugees in Colombo and other adjacent towns. Their houses and property have been looted and ransacked and their mosques desecrated. In the East surprise attacks on the Muslims are a common occurrence. Tens and hundreds are massacred at a time. Muslims are being killed in trains and buses, in mosques and schools and in markets and fields. Against an organized highly trained and well-equipped Tamil army, unorganized, hurriedly trained and ill-equipped Home Guards are not an even match. The Home Guards have also retaliated now and then with equal ferocity and venom. Yet the losses are

heavier on the Muslim side. Ironically, the regular armed forces of the government have now become bystanders, only ready to clear up the mess once the massacre has taken place.

The Tamil army's attempt to physically wipe out or drive away the Muslims from the Tamil districts is a senseless move and equally insane is the Muslim decision to confront the Tamils militarily. Some have described the massacre October 15 as a measure of ethnic cleansing by the LTTE. If that is so, it makes nonsense of its original claim that the Muslims are 'Islamic Tamils'. Factual convictions should not be sacrificed for political expediency. Have the Tamil fighters become a bunch of desperados? The Muslims (at the same time) must realize that to arm themselves to fight the Tamils will only worsen and not better matters. A farsighted leadership is the immediate need amongst the Muslims. The Tamil Muslims who are now squatting in other areas as refugees are misfits in the new environment and along with the declining economy of the country may become the unwanted guests in those localities. Furthermore the Muslims of the East cannot be driven out from their traditional homeland; [the sheer magnitude of their number is a deterrent]. The Muslims of the North and East have to live with the Tamils and the future of the two communities is irretrievably inter-linked.

The current trend of intercommunal vendetta between the two must be stopped. The Muslims should negotiate not with the government in Colombo which is not seriously interested in solving the ethnic issue but with the Tamil command which seems to be calling all the shots now. The Tamil command on the other hand must provide clear assurance to the Muslims that the latter's economic and cultural interests will be protected and the community will be guaranteed of its legitimate share in the regional administration, whatever the form the eventual solution would be to the country's ethnic problem. To enable this peace effort to materialise the Muslim leaders in Colombo should refrain from their traditional pastime of making statements on behalf of the Tamil Muslims.

Training people to sacrifice themselves results not in altruism but in a kind of fascination that makes them jump off a cliff, not to help but merely to follow those who have already leapt to their deaths. Especially when they foresee, not through thought but through fear, the annihilation to come.

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