
WOMEN'S COALITION FOR PEACE SUPPORTS P-TOMS

We welcome the P-TOMS as a necessary step in addressing the urgent needs of the population affected by the Tsunami. The goodwill and sympathy showed by many for the victims of the Tsunami in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy proved that it is possible to overcome long held antagonisms of class, caste and ethnic barriers. Women's groups were amongst the many that mobilized to provide speedy relief assistance to those affected.

Unfortunately the Tsunami crisis led to partisan differences and political wrangling has prevented adequate assistance, particularly with regard to alternative shelter, housing and livelihood support for those affected. This is a reality in the South as well as the north and East. The still unresolved issue of the buffer zone is only one example of the manner in which the State Tsunami assistance mechanisms have failed to put the concerns of the affected first.

Most anti P-TOMS agitation that the country experienced during the past few weeks portray an irresponsible disregard for the plight of those most affected. Many of those affected in the North and East were already victimized by the conflict. It is imperative therefore that the government puts in place an inclusive and representative structure that is both responsive and responsible for alleviating their suffering with the greatest possible speed.

While the inclusion of Muslim representation at the High Level Committee is an important development, the fact that neither the Muslims nor the dissenting Tamil parties were included in the negotiations that led to the formulation of the P-TOMS, and that Muslims were not given signatory status is regrettable. Given that this represents an important benchmark of the government and LTTE coming together, and marks a forward movement towards any future power sharing, it is hoped that a more democratic and representative process is followed in future negotiations.

The Women's Coalition for Peace, regards the joint mechanism or the P-TOMS as a welcome proposal that will hopefully address the needs of those affected. We also commend the fact that the text contains language assuring "proper gender balance" in both the district and regional bodies. It is hoped that in implementation, the inclusion of women will be more than mere tokenism. ■

VIOLENT MUSLIM MOBILIZATION IN SRI LANKA: SOME QUESTIONS

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Many observers of Sri Lanka politics are baffled by the reports of relatively well organized, though isolated, Muslim armed violence in the eastern corner of the island. Usually, conditions such as unequal treatment, oppression and discrimination either by the state or dominant groups lead to political and armed mobilization among minority ethnic groups.¹ This essay is an attempt to look at various dimensions of Muslim extremist mobilization recently emerged in the Eastern periphery of Sri Lanka.

Why have some Muslims in Sri Lanka begun to rebel? Is the state the main target of their 'rebellion'? Can a Muslim rebellion, if it exists at all, consolidate itself effectively? Answers to these three questions would be useful to understand the nature as well as the roots of Muslim rebellion in the eastern part of Sri Lanka.

Answers to the first two questions are simple. The Sri Lankan Muslims, who actively identify themselves as distinct from the Tamil, Sinhalese and Burgher communities on the basis of religious differences, consider themselves the most peaceful ethnic community in Sri Lanka. They live in a relatively peaceful atmosphere both with the largest minority, the Tamils, who have been fighting to establish an independent state and institutions in the North and the East of Sri Lanka, and the majority Sinhalese who seek domination over the minorities, particularly the Tamils.

Motives For 'Rebellion

Why are some Muslims rebelling? Social, political, and/or economic grievances usually encourage communities to use either political protests or violence as alternative means of expression. Oppression of non-dominant groups by the dominant

groups often generates motivations for rebellion. The more the state or dominant group oppresses minorities, the stronger is the reason for rebellion on the part of the dominated. These assumptions of the link between oppression and rebellion are useful to identify the motives of the Muslims' 'rebellion' in Sri Lanka.

It is quite significant that unlike the Tamil rebellion, the Muslim rebellion does not target the Sri Lankan state. The state or the dominant Sinhalese majority has not made a serious threat to the Muslims identity and the community's existence as the Tamil leadership has done before independence. Even before and after independence, Ponnambalam Ramanathan argued that the Muslims were Tamils in ethnicity but Mohammedans or Muslims in religious identity. Several decades later, in October 1990, V. Pirapakaran, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam leader, forcibly expelled northern Jaffna Muslims. Muslims widely believe that the LTTE was responsible for the massacre in 1991 of over 300 Muslims, more than 120 of them at prayer time inside the Katankudy mosque in Batticaloa. This violence has significantly contributed to the mobilization of Muslim protests against the larger Tamil minority. Muslim frustration has been gaining momentum because the LTTE is perceived to treat the Eastern Muslims harshly. The LTTE cadres are believed to abduct Muslim youth in the province and extort money from other Muslims. In addition, Muslim non-participation in the peace process has created much resentment among the Muslim youth. The dominance of narrow Tamil nationalism has broken the back of Tamil-Muslim unity, sown Muslim ethno-religious nationalism and led to the current wave of anti-Tamil mobilization.

Muslim Nationalism

Muslim nationalism initially led to the formation of a Muslim political party for the expression of their own identity in Sri Lankan politics. This occurred in the 1980s, well before the Tamil cultural assaults began to be leveled against the Muslims. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), formed in the mid 1980s by the late M.H.M. Ashraff, contested the provincial and general elections in the late 1980s. The SLMC utilized in the election campaign Islamic religious rhetoric and Muslim nationalism to win Muslim sympathy. It managed to obtain much of the northeast Muslim votes. The fact is that the LTTE atrocities against the Muslims increased aggressively after the formation of the SLMC. Incidentally, the SLMC maintained cordial relations with the Sri Lankan as well as Indian ruling elites.

Some observers make the point that the Ashraff-led SLMC did not do enough to alleviate the difficulties Muslims faced during this period. In fact, as a political party, the SLMC's major aim was to win Muslim votes. But the oppressed and marginalised Muslims expected more from the SLMC. They expected the SLMC to play an active role similar to the one the LTTE played for the Tamil community to win Tamil rights from the Sinhalese-dominated government. But the SLMC, as a political party established by the

business and educated elites, had its own constraints and compulsions for winning strategies to survive in the democratic system. Moreover, the SLMC is not a cadre-based political party dedicated to working with the oppressed Muslims in the northeast. Neither has it been a party that could marshal Muslim democratic populism to campaign for northeast Muslim rights. The SLMC's narrow focus and myopia frustrated Muslims, particularly the youth. Cracks started to appear in the party following the mysterious death of its leader M.H.M. Ashraff. The SLMC's limitations as a political party irritated Muslim youth. Muslim expectations were frustrated, especially when factionalism between the mainstream section led by Rauf Hakeem and a powerful splinter group led by Ferial Ashraff, widow of the late M.H.M. Ashraff, began to rock the SLMC.

Muslim Militancy

In my view, it is possible for a Muslim militancy to develop in Sri Lanka's Northeast, due to two major political factors. First and foremost is the LTTE's oppression and practices of discrimination against the northeast Muslims. The second is the SLMC's failure to carry out a moderate nationalist agenda. With regard to the second point, a recent study on Islamist politics by Vali Nasar suggests that political programs of Islamic radical movements can be effectively challenged if Muslim moderate parties, or Muslim democrats, formulate policies to balance Islamist agendas.² In this regard, the SLMC has failed to advance a moderate Muslim nationalism beyond its electoral aims.

Can a Muslim rebellion consolidate itself effectively, in case such a rebellion exists? Actually, there is no hard evidence to confirm the presence of violent Muslim mobilization in the eastern territory of Sri Lanka. Reports indicate that there are some frustrated Muslim elements active particularly in the eastern province.³ Diplomats and military officials say there are links between these groups and Pakistan and Bangladesh, but the nature of these relationships is not yet clear. Some Tamils have reported the presence of an 'Osama group' in the Eastern province. One entity most sources claim to exist is the so-called Muslim Defense Group. Another Islamist group has opened an office at Kinniya in Trincomalee, north of Batticaloa. However, organized Muslim mobilization is still not a major factor in the political life in Eastern Sri Lanka.

Can a militant Muslim mobilization survive in Eastern Sri Lanka? Geography and demography in the province is not in favour of a Muslim insurgency to survive. Any serious politico-military movement of a regional ethnic community requires a base area as well as a regional economy in order to sustain the movement. As for the militant movement of Sri Lankan Tamils, while they predominantly live in the northeast of Sri Lanka, they have had direct access to the sea. This fact has played a significant role in sustaining the Tamil insurgency. The Tamil-dominated northeast is also the home for deep jungle areas and other resources that are crucial components of any guerrilla struggle. Significantly, Tamils

had their own economy, largely based on agriculture, to support the mobilization. In addition, the LTTE's solid propaganda and information campaign played a major role in advancing Tamil mobilization. These internal factors helped the LTTE to consolidate the Tamil movement in the northeast, even bringing some parts of the province under their direct administration.

A Muslim insurgency in the Eastern province will not have such favourable domestic conditions. With regard to the economic factors, it is true that the Muslim economy is reasonably strong in the Eastern region. Muslim influence in agriculture and small business is widespread. Yet, the Eastern Muslim economy is largely mixed with the Tamil-dominated parts of the region. Muslims would enjoy no economic progress if a major conflict builds up between the Tamils and Muslims. The Amparai district is a clear case in point. Muslims will have to lose a large portion of their agricultural land and other resources if any Muslim rebellion targets the Tamils. Hence, rich Muslim farmers and traders would hesitate to back any Muslim insurgency. As a result, the Muslim rebellion would face early collapse. This stands in sharp contrast to the Tamil mobilization, which benefited both from the farmers and the business sectors. Moreover, any Muslim rebellion is unlikely to enjoy strong external support as the LTTE once received from India thanks to Cold War politics. The LTTE still receives moral and material assistance from Tamils in India and around the world, including Tamil diaspora, and maintain good relations with key international actors.

Some believe that a Sri Lankan Muslim movement would receive financial and material assistance from Arab and Middle East Muslim countries. This is not possible primarily due to the post 9/11 international political climate. Both India and the US will not allow any free flow of financial or material support to a radical Muslim mobilization in Sri Lanka. In other words, even if a militant Muslim mobilization begins in Sri Lanka, its consolidation will face serious obstacles, both domestic and international. Those frustrated Muslims need to think carefully before they initiate any militant movement to challenge their oppressors. As Sun Zi, the ancient Chinese military strategist, put in his famous work *The Art of War*, "war (or insurgency) is the road to survival or ruin. Hence, it is a subject which calls for careful study."⁴ Perusing the idea of a Muslim mobilization or violent intifada to confront the Tamil rebellion or to secure protection to the community is not a wise choice. Any such attempt would be suicidal to the Muslim community.

Muslim Concerns

Nevertheless, the legitimate concerns of the Muslims need careful attention, and such concern should go beyond mere academic interest. In fact, the Muslim fear of LTTE domination is

not imaginary. The LTTE is still continuing their narrow policies concerning the Muslim minority. The LTTE is not yet willing to allow expelled Muslims to resettle in the North. They have shown inflexibility in handing over the captured Muslim lands. The ban prohibiting the Muslims cultivating their own land continues. The abduction of Muslims as well as the practices of unfair taxation and extortion increases their fear and insecurity. Above all, the LTTE's tactical refusal to accommodate a Muslim delegation in the peace negotiations has aggravated the Muslim fear about Tamil/LTTE domination in a post-conflict Northeast.

Then, what should be done to alleviate Muslim fears and to dissuade radical Muslim mobilization? Counter mobilization and repressive action is not a viable option. The situation might get better if both local and international actors act responsibly. There should be sufficient pressure on the LTTE to re-think their relationship with the Muslim community. There should also be international pressure on both the LTTE and Sri Lankan leaders to permit a Muslim delegation to actively participate in future peace negotiations. In the meantime, the SLMC needs to play a responsible political role in the national affairs concerning Tamils and Muslims. In this regard, Muslim political forces need to formulate their policies, not only to win Muslim votes, but also to support reasonable Tamil nationalist aspirations. Meanwhile, the LTTE has a bigger task to erase Muslim fears and concerns caused by their own policies. The LTTE will hardly gain much if the Muslims pose a serious threat to their interests. In fact, the narrow practices of the LTTE would not only further damage Tamil-Muslim relations, but also shove Muslim reactionary forces to control Muslim politics. In the end, they will seriously hamper the efforts of progressive Muslim forces that work for Tamil-Muslim unity while challenging the illiberal and narrow nationalist Muslim forces. ■

Notes

1. Ted Robert Gurr, and Harff Barbara *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Oxford: West view press, 1994). pp83-85.
2. Vali Nasar 'The Rise of Muslim Democracy,' *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16 (2) April 2005, pp, 13-26.
3. Suspected Islamic fundamentalists recently killed a young Muslim in Eravur, in the eastern Sri Lankan district of Batticaloa, apparently because he and his cohorts were indulging in "un-Islamic" activities. Prior to this, some Islamic vigilante organizations had issued a warning that they would not tolerate un-Islamic activities like consuming alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and misbehaving with women.
4. Sun Zi, *The Art of War* (Beijing: people's China publishing House, 1996). pp7-10.

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