



## Research Article

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# Muslim Minority in Post-war Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Aluthgama and Digana Violences

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## Abstract

*Sri Lanka saw an unprecedented degree of anti-Muslim sentiment followed by violence perpetrated by certain extremist elements in recent years. This article primarily examines the implications of anti-Muslim violence that occurred from Aluthgama to Digana and the causes behind the violence. The article shows that anti-Muslim sentiment is manifested in several dimensions: campaigns against Halal, Muslim attire, cattle slaughter, and attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses. This manifestation has resulted in violence against Muslims, causing massive damages to their properties. The study argues that fear of growing Muslim population, economic competition with Muslims, Mahavamsa mentality, and exceptionalism to Buddhist clergies, fear of Islam, and formation of ethnic-based political parties are the causes of anti-Muslim sentiment which later culminated in the form of violence. Therefore, the government needs to enforce law and order equally on all citizens and ensure a policy of multiculturalism and tolerance is strictly maintained.*

**Keywords:** anti-Muslim sentiments, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, economic competition, fear of Islam

## 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is home to plural communities such as Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims as major ethnic groups. Most of the Sinhalese are Buddhists in terms of religion with 70.1% of the population, while the Tamils are mostly followers of Hinduism constituting 12.58% of the population. The Muslims, the second-

largest ethnic minority, are followers of Islam with 9.66% of the population. Christianity, the fourth dominant religion of the country, is followed by 7.62% of the population (Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka, 2012).

The end of the civil war in May 2009, which lasted about three (03) decades, presented a fresh opportunity to restore peace and reconciliation in the country. However, what transpired after the war was otherwise, with Sinhala Buddhist hard-line elements espousing its nationalistic / supremacist ideology while targeting the minorities, especially the Muslims in the post-war scenario (Fowsar, 2014). Although all major ethnic groups were victims of the ethnic violence and civil war, ethnic-based political dynamics associated with religion and nationalism has got deeply embedded into the psyche of the people of the country. These political developments, coupled with the emergence of extremist religious elements, have radically changed the political landscape and caused enormous challenges to the pursuit of restoring peace and harmony in the country (Imtiyaz, 2010).

In post-war Sri Lanka, most importantly, violence against Muslims in Aluthgama in 2014, in Ampara followed by Kandy in 2018 has been intensive. All of these outbreaks of violence could be attributed to the sustained campaign of Sinhala Buddhist hard-line elements, which resulted in enormous damage both on the lives and properties of Muslims. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to examine the violence perpetrated against Muslims by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners from Aluthgama to Digana and exploring its implications and the causes behind rising anti-Muslim sentiments and violence in the current context of Sri Lanka.

## 2. Review of Literature

Buddhist monks constitute a significant entity in the country while earning respect and reverence of the mainstream Buddhist community. The state policies designed by successive rulers highlighted the supremacy of Buddhism from the early days of independence. Political parties based on religious identity are a relatively new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. At present, two major political parties can be exclusively categorised as entities espousing Sinhala Buddhist ideology for electoral gains: Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (JNP). However, other main political parties (United National Party & Sri Lanka Freedom Party) have pro-Sinhala Buddhist nationalistic agendas too. Currently, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya (SR), Ravana Balakaya (RB), and Mahason Balakaya (MB) are regarded as the main proponents of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology spreading hatred and intolerance towards minorities, particularly Muslims, and thereby fomenting violence against them in a sustained vitriolic campaign in different parts of the country in the post-war context (Imtiyaz, 2010).

While Muslims define their identity based on religion, Sinhalese and Tamils define their identity through language (Nuhman 2016). However, there has been an instance where Sinhalese conflate their religion along with language to define their ethnic identity in the country. Thus, Sinhala elites promoted Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism or supremacism on the basis of religion in order to ensure their socio-political interests during the Colonial period (Obeyesekere, 1979).

Anagarika Dharmapala, who was one of the strong architects of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism at that time, propagated the idea that Sinhala Buddhists were the 'sons of the soil' and others were 'alien' people, thereby implying that the country belonged to Sinhala Buddhists only and that the other minorities were outsiders who were not part of the nation or the country. He, in fact, developed animosity towards Muslims and Islam, citing economic competition (Guruge, 1965). On the other hand, Sinhala Buddhists maintain that "Sri Lanka is Sinhaladipa (Island of the Sinhalese), and Dhammadipa (Island Preserving the Buddha's Teachings). Sinhalese Buddhist have used these claims to advocate an ideology that justifies majority domination and minority subordination" (De Votta, 2007).

Meanwhile, Sinhala Buddhist nationalists viewed minorities, particularly Muslims as rivals in the socio-economic and political spheres. As such, fierce competition between Sinhalese and Muslims in the economic sector led to ethnic hostilities (Ali, 1986). Ethno-religious majoritarianism, which seeks to disregard minorities, has mostly dominated the agenda of the main political parties like United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), though they were seen to be inclusive in

outlook. The Sinhala Only Act in 1956 and the 1972 constitution providing Buddhism a special status, which the 1978 constitution reiterated, were among the major manifestations of Sinhala Buddhist supremacism (Ali, 2018). This ideology insists that Sri Lanka must be a unitary state and thus discounts meaningful devolution to the minority communities. This has largely contributed to strengthening Sinhala Buddhist ideology further while paving the way for Tamil separatism and militarism (Kerney, 1967). In particular, discrimination against minorities in the public sector, anti-Tamil riots occurred in 1977, 1981, and 1983, and Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) were also reflective of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism in the country.

Formation of Sinhala nationalist movements such as Jathika Chinthanaya, which later emerged as Sinhala Urumaya, a Sinhala Buddhist political party founded in the 2000s, underlines a new form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology (Seneviratne, 2004). It propagated Buddhism to be officially made as a state religion, the national anthem should be sung in Sinhala only, and LTTE terrorism should be defeated militarily (Nuhman, 2016). It is clear Sinhala Urumaya (SU) as a political party espoused Sinhala Buddhist ideology in the political platform especially in the Southern part of Sri Lanka, which paid dividends for them to secure a seat in Parliament at the 2000 General election. Formation of Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) as a political party in 2004, an offshoot of Sinhala Urumaya, continued the legacy of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the mainstream politics of Sri Lanka. JHU contested the 2004 Parliamentary General Election fielding 200 Buddhist monks across the country and secured nine seats in Parliament. The entry of Buddhist monks in politics was a harbinger of what was to follow as a result of espousing Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism as their crucial element of propaganda in a country that has historically been identified as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural country (Nuhman, 2016).

The defeat of the Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has further emboldened Sinhala Buddhist nationalists supported by certain extremist Buddhist monks and politicians, and this new turn of events has led them to target the island's Muslims as new enemies. In the Mahinda Rajapaksa era, the resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist supremacism was more visualised with the militarisation of politics. More specifically, Buddha statues were proliferated in Muslim and Tamil areas in the Northeast, and state lands in the minority areas were also allocated to Buddhist temples. The Department of Archaeology took over certain areas of minorities under the guise of historically critical Buddhist sites. The defeat of the Mahinda Rajapakse regime that tacitly provided political patronage to Sinhala Buddhist hardliners saw the democratic transition of regime change in 2015 with a promise to end ethnoreligious violence in Sri Lanka. However, such hope of ending violence against ethnoreligious Muslims, more than three years later, is yet to be realised (Fazil, 2019).

Sinhala Buddhist hardliners became dominant during the height of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and shaped policies that reinforced Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. With the end of the war, the country has begun to witness a few disgruntled Buddhist monks advocating Buddhism as a weapon for power and glory, while curtailing the prospects of peace and harmony in the country presented in the post-war scenario (Perera, 2013).

Muslims live dispersed in small communities throughout the country with significant concentrations in the Eastern, North Central and Western Province and have been the most peaceful community. They have neither organised themselves for armed insurrection nor have they posed any religious or ethnic threat to the diverse fabric of Sri Lanka. Instead, they coexisted and integrated well with other communities (Getaberiya, 2013). Although Muslims have been plural and integrative, they are at the receiving end, particularly in the aftermath of the war that ended in 2009 with the defeat of LTTE. A virulently toxic anti-Muslim campaign followed by violence in various parts of the island was undertaken by certain Sinhala Buddhist hardliners, especially in the post-war context.

### 3. Research Methods

This is a qualitative study and relies on secondary materials such as academic journals, newspapers, reports from research centres, and online archives which have recorded the discourses and number of

incidents staged by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners against Muslims in different parts of Sri Lanka. Moreover, growing anti-Muslim sentiments and the resultant violence with its contributory factors are critically discussed in this article.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Escalation of anti-Muslim sentiments and violence in the post-war context

Episodes of high-intensity violence targeting the Muslims commenced by certain Sinhala Buddhist hard-line groups that propagated hatred and myths against ethnoreligious Muslims with impunity in the post-war context of Sri Lanka. Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balakaya (RB), Sinhala Ravaya (SR), Mahason Balakaya (MB) are some of the recently established Sinhala Buddhist organisations that propagate hostility, hatred and racism against Muslims. All these organisations with Sinhala Buddhist ideology attempted to implement their agendas with direct or indirect patronage of the government, causing enormous challenges to the ethnoreligious minorities, particularly Muslims.

Nevertheless, relations between Sinhalese and Muslims have significantly worsened with the emergence of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) in 2012, which is the culmination of post-war Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the country. It was alleged to have drawn inspiration from the 969 movements (Ma Ba Tha), a radical Buddhist organisation in Myanmar founded with the sole objective of espousing majoritarian Buddhist ideology at the expense of minority Muslims there, whose leader, Monk Ashin Virathu, visited Sri Lanka in the post-war period to boost the spirit of BBS. Moreover, the BBS received adequate political patronage during the Rajapakse regime despite the fact they poured lurid stories against the Muslims and turned them into the next enemy, the new 'other' (Gunasekara, 2018). The BBS, along with other hard-line groups, targeted the following cultural practices of Muslims and thus their anti-Muslim sentiments have been manifested in various dimensions, as can be explained in detail:

##### 4.1.1 Halal Branding

Sinhala Buddhist hardliners vehemently resisted the use of the halal logo being used in the food items produced in companies and then sold in groceries. Although halal is a universal strategy of food producers to attract Muslim consumers, the BBS strongly discounts it on the ground that it brings additional costs to the producers in Sri Lanka. Consequently, such propaganda against halal left the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema (ACJU) to cease issuing halal certification to numerous food-producing companies. Thus, this campaign against halal logo also has economic implications on Sinhalese producers as well, although some producers were unwilling to bear the additional cost of halal to their production (Nuhman, 2016).

##### 4.1.2 Cattle slaughter

In the post-war context, the BBS has also resisted the slaughter of cattle for food on the ground that it is inhumane and an affront to Buddhist values. This usually becomes a serious issue during the Haj festival time where Muslims perform Qurbani by slaughtering cattle to meet religious obligations. Meat or beef has been consumed not only by Muslims but also by Sinhalese too in the country. A large number of Sinhalese cattle breeders have immensely benefited due to cattle slaughtering as it generates a sustainable income. Despite all these benefits, BBS and other Buddhist nationalist forces effectively intensified their campaign against cattle slaughter, which prompted the President of the country in 2016 to order relevant authorities to explore the possibilities of importing meat from abroad to cater to the local market (Wimalaweera, 2016). This shows the radical dimension of Sinhala Buddhist ideology upon Muslims in the post-war scenario.

#### 4.1.3 Muslim attire

The other aspect the BBS has strongly resisted is the wearing of abaya (a loose-fitting, long-sleeved robe), hijab (headscarf) and niqab (face covering) by Muslim women (Nuhman, 2016). They have coerced the Sinhalese to ridicule it and bully them in public places. Although this propaganda against hijab, abaya and niqab was unsuccessful because it is a fundamental rights issue, it seriously drove a wedge between Sinhalese and Muslims. It prompted Muslim women to restrict their movements in Sinhala dominated areas while wearing such attire. This growing tendency of Muslim attire could be attributed to the Islamization of several Islamic movements that emerged in the country in the 1970s and Arabization (intrusion of Arabic culture into Sri Lankan Muslim culture) due to Middle East employment. On the other hand, hostility to Muslim attire is also a reflection of demonising or caricaturing Muslim women with a headscarf in the backdrop of Islamophobia sweeping across the world, particularly after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre in the USA.

#### 4.1.4 Attacks on places of worship

Sinhala Buddhist hardliners have targeted places of worship of Muslims, that is, Mosques across the country in recent years. It began with an attack on a 400-year-old Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura in 2001 carried out by a mob of more than 100 people consisting of Buddhist monks (Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin, 2016). Consequently, several mosques in places like Anuradhapura, Dambulla, Mahiyangana, Grandpass and Maligawatta were attacked and damaged either partially or entirely by the followers of BBS and other outfits like Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balakaya with the law enforcement authorities in the country turning a blind eye to such atrocities (Farook, 2014a). This has been a continuous phenomenon in the post-war scenario where places of worship belonging to minorities have come under deleterious attack by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners headed by monks. These types of mass-scale violence and attacks against Muslims persisted from Aluthgama to Digana. Thus, the next section delves into the violence perpetrated against Muslims from Aluthgama to Digana.

#### 4.2 Two cases: Aluthgama and Digana or Kandy violence

This section delves explicitly into the violence perpetrated against Muslims in Aluthgama and Kandy as two significant cases in the recent history of Sri Lanka.

##### 4.2.1 Aluthgama violence

Mass-scale violence and attacks against Muslims, instigated by Sinhala Buddhist supremacists like BBS occurred in Aluthgama and Dharga Town, which is considered as one of the severe incidents against Muslims in the post-war situation. The incident was not a spontaneous act of violence against Muslims, but a well-orchestrated attack perpetrated against the community on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2014. Such attacks targeted lives, economic establishments and places of worship of Muslims in the area (Subramanian 2018). The scale of damage caused by Aluthgama violence is shown in the table below:

**Table 1.** The extent of Damage in Aluthgama Violence

Category	Extent of damages
Death Toll	03 persons
Injured	88 persons
Mosques Damaged	03
Houses Destroyed	174
Muslim Hotels Burnt	79
Muslim Hotels Damaged	37
Three Wheelers Damaged	37
Other Vehicles Damaged	15

Source: Mohideen, 2014

In contrast to the official figures of the Aluthgama violence, some statistics suggest that at least four people were directly killed, about 370 families were displaced and 5.8 billion worth of property was damaged. Meanwhile, on June 16, 2014, a garment factory with 400 Sinhala female workers in Mirisuwatta was attacked (Farook 2014a). Such violence against Muslims did not end with Aluthgama. On the contrary, it persisted across the country in the post-war context. A civil society organization called the Secretariat for Muslims has recorded 538 anti-Muslim cases that took place between 2013 and 2015. Such incidents could be listed based on the incidents occurred annually as follows:

**Table 2.** Anti-Muslim Violence from 2013 to 2015

Year	Incidents of Anti-Muslim Violence
2013	287
2014	215
2015	36
Total	538

**Source:** Secretariat for Muslims, 2015

These incidents were reported nationwide and aimed at targeting the business establishments of Muslims and their places of worship. It also included vilifying the holy Quran, physical violence, threat or coercion, harassment, discrimination, hate campaign or propaganda, etc. against Muslims. Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya (SR), Ravana Balakaya (RB) are among the key perpetrators of violence against Muslims reported across the country from 2013 to 2015 (Secretariat for Muslims, 2015). This is precisely the critical factor that prompted the minorities to vote against the Mahinda Rajapakse regime in 2015 that was alleged to have provided political patronage to Sinhala Buddhist hardliners or turned a blind eye toward them.

Nevertheless, the democratic transition that took place in 2015 with the regime change of Mahinda Rajapakse saw no end to the violence perpetrated against Muslims by the Sinhala Buddhist hardliners. However, they went to mute mode for a certain period after the new government was formed. The soft-peddling approach of the new government towards Sinhala Buddhist hardliners whenever they engaged in anti-Muslim propaganda has provided them fresh inspiration to inflict much damage upon Muslims in a vigorous manner. Thus, Muslims continued to suffer at the hands of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners even under the Yahapalanaya government (good governance), the slogan of the new government that ushered in 2015 with promises to end racism. The following is the latest list of anti-Muslim violence reported from 2016 to 2017.

**Table 3.** Anti-Muslim Violence from 2016 to 2017

Year	Number of Anti-Muslim Incidents
2016	81
2017	25
Total	106

**Source:** Secretariat for Muslims, 2017

Similarly, these incidents were also reported nationwide and targeted the business establishments of Muslims and their places of worship. Anti-Muslim sentiments persist in the form of physical violence, threat or coercion, harassment, discrimination, hate campaign or propaganda, etc. against Muslims. Buddhist hard-line elements like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya (SR), Ravana Balakaya (RB) were among the key perpetrators of violence against Muslims during this period (Secretariat for Muslims 2017). Early 2018 began with anti-Muslim violence in Ampara and Digana due to the sustained

campaign against Muslims in various parts of the country. This will be extensively dealt with in the following section.

#### 4.2.2 Digana or Kandy violence

Full-scale violence against Muslims in Digana and some other parts of Kandy was preceded by a mini attack against Muslims in Ampara on February 26th night following an argument between a Sinhalese customer and a Muslim hotel owner over alleged 'sterilisation pills' found in a curry of a kottu roti ( a type of meal) served in a Muslim-owned eatery/hotel. However, it was later revealed the allegation was false and that what was found in the curry of the kottu were a few puffy particles of flour floating in the gravy, not sterilisation pills as alleged. It was alleged that Muslims were conspiring to de-populate the Sinhalese by mixing sterilisation pills in the food served in eateries. Subsequently, the violence caused irreparable damage. The scale of contamination of Ampara violence is shown in the following table:

**Table 4.** The scale of damage in Ampara violence

Category	Number of Damages
Mosque	01
Muslim Hotels	03
Grocery Store	01
Building	01
Vehicles	08

**Source:** Jeyaraj, 2018b

All available evidence indicates that the attack was pre-planned and aimed at targeting the economic strength of Muslims. Discussion on the motive of the attack was be undertaken, followed by the Kandy violence and its damages.

The violence in Kandy against Muslims erupted following a personal altercation between a Sinhalese truck driver from Teldeniya in Kandy and four Muslim men over a traffic dispute on 22nd February that led to the death of the Sinhalese driver. Although the Muslim attackers were immediately arrested and remanded, Sinhala Buddhist hardliners mobilised their mobs and launched an attack on the properties of Muslims from 4th March, almost two weeks after the accident occurred. The violence persisted for over four days in different parts of Kandy despite curfews and emergency law being declared. The extent of damage in Kandy violence is shown below in the table.

**Table 5.** The scale of Damage in Kandy Violence

Category	Full	Partial	Minor	Total
Mosques	01	06	10	17
Houses	30	71	188	289
Business Places	37	80	100	217
Vehicles	41	14	27	82

**Source:** All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema, 2018

The violence against Muslims began in Digana initially but spread like wildfire to other parts of Kandy district, causing significant damages to the properties of Muslims. Thus, the damage caused to Muslims in various areas is shown below in the table. It also caused the death of a Muslim boy who got trapped in a burning building and choked on the fumes. Besides, it was reported that the total loss of Kandy violence upon Muslims was around 1 billion rupees. The fact that physical harm or damage caused to

Muslims during the violence is explicitly minimal suggests that the motive of the perpetrators was not to cause physical harm or assault Muslims but to inflict more damages to their properties or economy of Muslims. This is a concrete manifestation of entrenched racism among Sinhala Buddhists towards ethnoreligious Muslims in the country. Paradoxically, this is the reality of post-war scenario in the country.

Moreover, all the violence against Muslims from Aluthgama to Digana was unleashed with the patronage of state and law enforcement agencies in the country. First-hand evidence from eyewitnesses suggests that law enforcement agencies like police and armed forces were complicit in the attacks on business centres of Muslims and mosques in Digana and other parts of Kandy (Fernando and Wettimuny, 2018). The fear of losing Sinhala dominant constituency in the South when it comes to arresting the Sinhala Buddhist hardliners prompted the state to be oblivious to the violence against Muslims that occurred from Aluthgama to Digana and led them to turn a blind eye to the said incidents.

Although the Aluthgama violence was the root cause of the Mahinda Rajapakse regime debacle in the 2015 election, it did not end there. However, the new coalition government was constituted with a promise of ending the violence against minorities, particularly Muslims. Thus, it is imperative to explore the causes that contributed to the persistence of violence against Muslims from Aluthgama to Digana. The following section extensively deals with such causes of violence against Muslims.

#### 4.3 Causes of anti-Muslim violence

There were many factors behind the recent upsurge of violence against Sri Lankan Muslims that commenced from Aluthgama to Kandy. It was an well organised attack by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists forces since they had mobilized radicals to carry out their targets through various communication networks including social media (Keelan, 2018).

##### 4.3.1 Fear of growing population of Muslims

Scholars rightly observe that the Sinhala Buddhist community is a 'majority with a minority complex' (Tambiah, 1992). This existential fear of Sinhala Buddhists in the country is exacerbated with the alleged growing population of Muslims which is considered a potential threat to the numerical majority or demographic dominance of the Sinhala Buddhist community (Wettimuny, 2018). Thus, they obsess over the demographics of Muslims. However, this claim can largely be disputed and debunked as a misinformed and misplaced one having no factual foundation. The Muslim population had grown from 7.5 percent in 1881 to 9.3 percent in 2012. However, the Sinhalese population increased from 66.1% in 1911 to 74.9% in 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka, 2012).

Thus, it can be seen that the population of Sinhalese has climbed from 66 percent to 74.9 percent within 100 years, while the Muslim population has risen from 7.5 percent to 9.3 percent in 131 years. This underlines that Muslims cannot overtake Sinhalese in terms of population growth in times to come. Batcha argues that the gap in the population size between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka steadily increased from 1881 and that Muslims will never be able to exceed the number of Buddhists in the foreseeable future in Sri Lanka (Batcha, 2017).

The issue of infertility pill (wanda pethi) triggered the Ampara violence, and it had a close link with the myth of Sinhalese population growth exploited by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners to spread anti-Muslim propaganda that they are trying to 'sterilise' Sinhalese. Sinhala Buddhist hardliners constantly adopt violence as a means of assuaging their existential fear of becoming a minority. Thus, this myth of the growing Muslim population has to be effectively countered with solid evidence in the context of the increasing tendency of anti-Muslim propaganda in the country.

##### 4.3.2 Economic competition

Muslims have traditionally been considered as a trading community. They are seen as a dominant

group of people in the market economy, especially after economic liberalisation in the late 1970s helped consolidate their position in trading and made the economy of the country stronger. Consequently, Sinhalese have had hard times competing with Muslim traders in the market economy (Keethaponcalan, 2018). This is one of the reasons that prompt the rioters to target Muslim commercial establishments like shops and industries mostly.

Historically, fierce competition between Muslims and Sinhalese has led to ethnic hostilities and violence in the country. That Muslims traded unfairly with Sinhalese remains a constant allegation. Narratives of fear posed to Sinhala Buddhists that increasing presence of Muslims in the economic sector will jeopardise the economic interests of Sinhalese have consistently been encouraged by the Sinhalese Buddhist hard-line elements with the support of Sinhala traders whose interest is to weaken the dominance of Muslims in the economic sector. It is widely believed that Sinhala business leaders are funders of Bodu Bala Sena and other Sinhala Buddhist militant groups (Keelan, 2018).

As stated above, even though the violence in Aluthgama and Kandy was triggered by a traffic dispute between Sinhalese and Muslim men, it led to despicable violence causing enormous damage to the properties, mosques, houses and vehicles of Muslims. For instance, although four Muslim attackers of the Sinhalese truck driver were immediately arrested and remanded in Kandy, nobody could stem the violence against Muslims after almost two weeks when the victim died. Systematic attacks on selected Muslim shops and houses in Digana and Teldeniya in Kandy areas show that this was an explicitly well-orchestrated incident targeting the Muslim economy in Kandy area. Mahason Balakaya, which is one of the militant Sinhala Buddhist organisations, was believed to be behind the violence in Kandy mobilising and instigating the Sinhala youth against Muslims.

Nevertheless, some sections of scholars argue that the allegation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists that the Muslims are economically prosperous compared to Sinhalese is debatable. Hussein argues that the allegation that Muslims possess inordinate wealth is naïve and that the economic positions of all the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka are more or less the same (Hussein, 2017). Thus, he argues, propaganda is undertaken by some Sinhala Buddhist nationalists with sinister motives to marginalise the economy of Muslims. A recent report compiled by the National Shooru Council also challenges the thesis of Muslims' economic prominence. Their analysis reveals that while the national poverty index remains at 6.7 percent, the poverty of Muslims living in sub-urban and rural areas remains at 21 percent, which is three times higher than that of the national index (Ajwardeen, 2015). This shows that Muslims are not economically prosperous as propagated by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists. However, this negative perception led the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists to hold grudges against Muslims, which subsequently culminated in the form of violence in various parts of Sri Lanka.

#### 4.3.3 *Mahawamsa Mentality*

A considerable segment of Sinhalese has apprehension that the Buddhism is under threat due to the activities of aliens like Tamils and Muslims (Keelan, 2018). Critics have also pointed out to an ancient epic called the Mahavamsa, which is also known as the Great Chronicle which traces the ascendance of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and asserts that the Sinhalese established civilisation in the island, as a motivating factor of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. This mentality could be said to drive Sinhala Buddhist nationalists to harbour an entitlement complex in terms of the nature of the state (Gunathilleke, 2018). As this mentality is pervasive among Sinhala Buddhist nationalists, it has served to justify and perpetrate ethno-religious violence against Muslims as a means of maintaining political power and advance their supremacy.

#### 4.3.4 *Exceptional treatment to Buddhist monks*

The mainstream Buddhists hold high respect for Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, and therefore their actions are tolerated not because of anything but because of the saffron robe they wear that represents Buddha and Dhamma (doctrine) (De Votta and Stone 2008). In such a context, some Buddhist monks

went to the extent of emphasising the role of monks in the political and social space. For instance, Walpola Rahula Thero emphasised the significance of monks' role in social service and political activity (Zuhair, 2016). His persistent rhetoric contributed to the formation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist political parties like Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) that included Buddhist monks as party members. Moreover, Buddhist monks enjoy exceptional impunity even if they were to unleash violence against a group of people or ethno-religious minorities.

A case in point is the recent instance where Ampitiya Sumanarathna Thero, the chief incumbent monk of Batticaloa Temple, physically as well as verbally abused state officials when they visited his Temple to disconnect the electricity service for non-payment of arrears. The same is the case with BBS General Secretary, Galogoda Atte Gnanasara Thero, who was the architect of the Aluthgama violence. Both Ampitiya Thero and Gnanasara Thero, popularly known for their vitriolic and incendiary hate speech, enjoyed impunity under the Mahinda Rajapakse regime. However, the same situation persists even under the new Yahapalanaya (good governance) government brought to power by the popular will in January 2015. Gnanasara Thero evaded arrest for several days and was promptly granted bail when he finally surrendered to the courts. It can easily be understood that exceptionalism enforced upon certain Buddhist monks led them to break rule and law and even unleash violence against ethnoreligious minorities like Muslims. It is widely believed prominent monks like Gnanasara Thero and Ampitiya Thero were partly behind the Aluthgama and Kandy violence against Muslims. However, no substantive action has been taken against them so far. This, the paper argues, is the implicit exceptionalism enforced upon Buddhist monks who go to the extent of breaking law and order.

#### 4.3.5 *Fear of Islam or Islamophobia*

Recent instances of Islamicization in terms of attire, halal diet and other aspects of life among Muslims has prompted Sinhala Buddhists to cultivate a view that there has been a process of radicalisation within the Sri Lankan Muslim community. Ultra-religious orthodoxy propagated by Tablighi Jamath (TJ) from the 1960s and Saudi-backed Thowheed Jamath (TJ) from the 1980s has created the ideology of Umma consciousness (unity among Muslims) among Muslims which runs counter to the indigenous culture and integration of the Muslims of the country (Ali, 2014). The proliferation of mosques in cities and use of loudspeakers to call to prayers five times a day becomes an eyesore to Sinhala Buddhist nationalists; wearing of abaya and hijab with niqab (face covering) by Muslim women and wearing of long Arab gown / jubba with white cap and long beards by Muslim men instead of traditional attires like sarong, shirt and coat provoke criticism and accentuate the fear and jealousy of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners towards Muslims of Sri Lanka (Ali, 2018). It can be argued these are some of the factors that have largely contributed to the hostility of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists against Muslims in Sri Lanka, which eventually manifested in the form of violence from Aluthgama to Kandy.

#### 4.3.6 *Formation of ethnic-based political parties*

The formation of an ethnic-based political party for Muslims, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), has drawn a lot of flak in academic discourse because it is considered as a historical blunder and parochial mentality of certain people. Moreover, conceit about a party founded by minority Muslims as the kingmaker in mainstream politics dominated by Sinhalese has also aggravated the hostility of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists against Muslims. Some argue that it has endangered the existence and security of Muslims living across the country at a time militant Sinhalese Buddhists have been rejuvenated in the post-war period with the political patronage given to them (Ali, 2018) Before the formation of SLMC, Muslim leaders rallied behind national political parties like United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and won a lot of aspirations of Muslims accordingly by being part of the national parties. However, the formation of SLMC left it to become a key decision-maker (kingmaker) in mainstream politics. This has apparently contributed to the hostility of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists against Muslims, which resulted in hatred and vengeance and propelled them to

commit violence against them.

The preceding section has extensively underlined the causes of anti-Muslim violence perpetrated from Aluthgama to Digana. However, it needs to be made clear that this is not an exclusive or exhaustive list of factors that have contributed to violence against Muslims in various parts of the country. There may be some other factors that need to be considered in times to come.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in the preceding sections indicates that the prospects of peace and harmony have progressively eroded in Sri Lanka in the light of rise of ethnonationalism in Post-war Sri Lanka. The anti-Muslim violence originating from Aluthgama to Digana marks the resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners that first emerged in 2012-2014 with the political patronage given by the former Mahinda Rajapaksa's government. With the regime change in January 2015, anti-Muslim activities had been on the decline. However, in 2017 violence against Muslims resurfaced, and the government had failed to curb such violence quickly. On the other hand, as highlighted above, the law enforcement agencies such as police and armed forces either stood passively when the mobs attacked Muslim businesses, mosques, their vehicles and their assets during the curfew enforced in areas like Aluthgama and Digana or colluded with mobs vandalising the properties of Muslims in those areas. This has created a fear psychosis and uncertainty among Muslims who have for centuries lived in peace and harmony in the country. Therefore, law and order is critical in maintaining peace and harmony among various communities in the country.

It is essential to foster healthy and constructive inter-religious relationships between ethnic groups living in Sri Lanka. As such, it is high time for religious and community leaders to engage in inter-faith dialogue and ethnoreligious tolerance at all possible levels to ensure that the people of all religions are equipped with an understanding of all religions in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is indispensable that steps should be taken to build ethnic harmony in post-war Sri Lanka. It is also important that the government proscribes all hard-line elements representing any ethnic or religious group in the country that propagate hate, intolerance and suspicion about other ethnic groups in public as well as virtual space like social media. It is critically important to bring all perpetrators of violence to book, including Buddhist monks and other religious leaders. It is also essential to estimate the extent of damage due to the violence and duly pay compensation to those who were severely affected. The government must publicly reassure the people of the country that recurrence of such violence will be nipped in the bud and all those who stoke hate and violence would be severely dealt with by the law of the land.

It will not be an easy task to set in motion a more comprehensive multicultural agenda in contemporary Sri Lanka in view of the current social realities and political atmosphere. While a strong multicultural and tolerant policy genuinely supported by the state and civil society is certainly a prerequisite for peace and stability in post-conflict Sri Lanka, it requires a powerful advocacy effort to inject a stronger dose of multiculturalism and tolerance in state policies and programmes related to mass media, education, official languages, cultural affairs and registration of persons.

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