
MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA'S ETHNIC CONFLICT

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Regardless of precisely when, Sri Lanka's protracted conflict began, is most often cast as one between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils. In this bipolar understanding of the conflict, the Muslim community seems to have no place, even though Muslims constitute close to 40 percent of the population in the conflict-affected Eastern Province and have been expelled from the Northern Province. This article describes the plight of these Muslims and analyzes the discursive and political powers by which Muslims are marginalized.¹

Muslims in Sri Lanka, categorized as a separate ethnic group, are Tamil speaking and have sometimes been claimed by Tamil nationalists to be part of the larger Tamil nation. Though publicly rejected by Muslim leaders at various historical moments, this inclusion in the Tamil nation has been attractive to some Muslims living in the Tamil majority areas of the North and East. Muslim youth of the Eastern Province, for instance, participated in Tamil groups in the early militancy against the state, and Eastern Muslim politicians often joined Tamil political parties to contest elections. This relationship, always difficult, has now deteriorated – with assistance from the state – into a complete polarization between the two communities. Muslims have been targeted, displaced and dispossessed by armed actors of both the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and recently by the LTTE breakaway faction – the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP).

While there has been some improvement in recognizing Muslim grievances since the beginning of the peace process in 2002, this has not resulted in any substantial policy changes to address such grievances. The peace process has failed to take Muslim issues sufficiently into account despite Muslim political actors being part of the government. In fact, the preamble to the ceasefire agreement, which set off the 2002–2005 peace process, referred to Muslims as a “group not directly party to the conflict.” While civil society and political actor agitations reversed this understanding to a certain extent, the current regime, with its pursuit of a military solution and a clear majoritarian platform, has little interest in Muslim concerns. Today it seems that the meager gains of those times may already have been lost. This article – through brief descriptions of the expulsion of 1990, the Post-Tsunami

Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) of 2005, and the siege of Mutur in 2006 – will trace the history of Muslim inclusion within the conflict and the peace process.

The expulsion of 1990

In October 1990, all over the Northern Province, close to 75,000 Muslims were compelled to vacate their homes at gun point, hand over their belongings, and leave.² In Jaffna, home to a fairly affluent trader community, the LTTE called all the men to a meeting during which cadres raided their homes. At the meeting, the men were instructed to leave their valuables behind and vacate their homes within two hours. Similar events happened with varying levels of brutality in the five other districts of the Northern Province. The expelled are still haunted by the manner in which they were compelled to leave, of women giving birth on the crowded boats, and of children drowning after falling overboard. Some say that the LTTE sold the abandoned goods at auction; some say they were given away.

These people lost their homes, possessions, livelihoods, communities and personal histories in one day. They left behind their belongings, their community and their sense of citizenship in Sri Lanka. A generation of children, unable to complete their education, lost their futures. Today they live in over-crowded settlements in the impoverished district of Puttalam. Their lives parallel the hundreds of thousands of Tamils and Sinhalese in the country who were also displaced and saw their lives destroyed. The Muslim experience, however, has its own distinctive features, which are reflective of their “no-place” status in the Sri Lankan polity. The story of their forced exodus is not widely known. Few commentators give the expulsion the attention that it merits as a highly significant historical event that changed the lives of the Muslims of the North and East.

The government has neither established a commission of inquiry nor arranged special administrative provisions for the displaced. A newly established government secretariat for northern Muslims located in Puttalam may handle certain administrative matters for the community, but there has been no attempt to find a long-term solution. Sixteen years after the expulsion they are still living as displaced persons in a

district other than their own, amongst those that consider them aliens. Many of the expelled Muslims fear registering themselves as residents of the Puttalam district since they might, thereby, forfeit their right to reclaim their property and resettle in the North.³ The host community in Puttalam resents the incursion of the refugees whom they say threaten the meagre resources available in the area. The Tamil-speaking Muslims have problems accessing health care and other state amenities due to difference in language. They cannot go back to their places of origin without the consent of the LTTE, the very organization that expelled them, as they fall under their de facto administrative jurisdiction. The other particularity of the suffering of Muslims in Sri Lanka is that their plight does not have a place in any larger nationalist narrative—either a narrative of a liberation struggle (Tamil nationalism), or a fight to safeguard the motherland (Sinhala nationalism). They remain caught in between, and the Muslim political leadership has not been successful in articulating its position in a manner independent of the two nationalisms dominant in the country. This lack of a larger narrative means that many commentators have treated the story of the Muslims as little more than a footnote to the conflict.

The LTTE and Tamil nationalists have different levels of justification for the expulsion—some speak of security issues, others speak of Muslims as traitors to the Tamil-speaking nation. In the first flush of the 2002–2005 peace process, former LTTE political strategist Anton Balasingham stated that the expulsion was a “strategic blunder” on its part and that Muslims were free to return.⁴ Tamilselvan, LTTE political wing leader, offered an official apology to representatives of the Muslim community, and assured assistance to resettle when the North was under its administration.⁵ Returning Muslims, however, reported different levels of harassment by local cadres. Today, close to 75,000 people from the North live in displacement in the north western district of Puttalam with no status, limited state assistance, and barely any voting rights. Given the severe poverty of the area in which they are forced to live, Muslims have become dependent on politicians, government functionaries and NGOs for all elementary needs.

To make matters worse, the fact that most Muslim political parties have their primary vote base in the East means that they are not especially sensitive to the particularities of the northern experience. The political process is forcing “solidarity” between the Muslims of the North and the East without taking into account the differences between the regions. For instance, the polarization between Eastern Tamils

and Muslims is intense, while Northern Muslims continue to speak of cordial relations with their Tamil neighbours and consider the LTTE rather than the Tamils as a people to be culpable for the expulsion.

The P-TOMS

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 devastated Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province. The Muslims in the area lived in densely crowded communities that have spread closer and closer to the ocean given the restricted availability of land. The tsunami took a devastating toll on these communities: official figures state that 18,000 Muslims, or 2 percent of the total Muslim population of the island, perished. Given that a large portion of the affected area was controlled by the LTTE, the government was urged by both local activists and the international community to work with the LTTE in formulating a mechanism to channel tsunami assistance. After many closed-door discussions, the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) to address reconstruction in the North and East was unveiled. To the Muslims it was an affront. The arrangement to address the devastation of the tsunami, had been produced as an agreement between the government and the LTTE without the participation or consultation of Muslims. While a representative of the Muslim parties was to be part of the essentially symbolic apex body, the rest of the tiers of the arrangement were weighted heavily in favour of the LTTE, which was also given veto power over the decision-making process. After the 2002 ceasefire, LTTE cadres had ready access to Muslim areas of the Eastern Province, and many incidents of intimidation and extortion were reported. Muslims feared that the P-TOMS would institutionalize this harassment. Another reason that Muslims loathed the P-TOMS was that, given its links to the peace process, many saw it as a precedent for the future exclusion of Muslim parties from the process. Muslim parties felt that this was yet another attempt by the LTTE to undermine their political leadership. By contrast, members of the government felt that the Muslims were not adequately acknowledging the important breakthrough of including Muslims in the apex body. However, Muslims were not happy with the paternalism of a process that “included” them without consultation. Muslim agitation against the P-TOMS compelled the government to address Muslim concerns even after the fact. However, the P-TOMS became irrelevant when the Supreme Court found sections of the agreement unconstitutional and a presidential election resulted in the end of President Kumaratunge’s regime. Moreover, with the current regime’s

pursuit of a military solution, the little that was gained by Muslims now seems lost.

Muttur in August 2006

The presidential elections of November 2005 brought to power the UPFA candidate Mahinda Rajapakse on an anti-minority, anti-peace process and pro-unitary state platform that was formed through the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) partnership with the two Sinhala nationalist parties. Rajapakse won the election mainly because the LTTE prevented the Tamil population of the North and East from voting. Through this symbolic assertion of its separation, the LTTE effectively prevented the election of the pro-peace, federalist United National Party candidate. From the date of the election victory, the peace process speedily deteriorated, with claymore mine attacks and aerial bombardments, as well as suicide bombings in Colombo becoming the norm. One of the most prominent incidents of the military confrontation was the LTTE's attempt to take over the mostly Muslim Eastern Province town of Muttur which borders one side of the Trincomalee natural harbour. On 1 August 2006 the town came under attack as the two parties fought for control, with both sides firing artillery towards the built-up areas of the town while the civilian population was still there. Forty-nine people seeking refuge in school buildings were killed. In the nearby mostly Tamil town of Thopur a shell landed on St. Anthony MV School, killing twelve people. When Muttur town was largely under LTTE control the Muslim community appealed through intermediaries for the government to end the shelling. The military, however, continued its firing into the town.

After three days of shelling, Muttur Muslims decided to leave the town and were given assurances of safety by the LTTE. On their way to Kantale, they were diverted off the main road (A15) by LTTE cadres, and taken to Kiranthimunai, which is under LTTE control. Here the LTTE picked out individuals alleged to be members of a Muslim armed group working with the government. These men were tied up and the rest were told to move on. The fate of 66 individuals who went missing at Kiranthimunai is still unknown.

Conclusion

It has long been in the interest of the chief protagonists of the conflict—the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE to propagate an understanding of the conflict in reductive two-party terms. While Muslim community agitations in the aftermath of the CFA of 2002 have compelled both parties to take notice of Muslim interests, their consideration of Muslim issues is little more than perfunctory and often for propaganda purposes only. The LTTE's empty invitation to Muslims to return to the North, and the paternalism of Muslim "inclusion" in the P-TOMS are cases in point. The mortar attacks on Muttur while Muslim civilians were still in the town is an indication of the current government's disregard for Muslim civilian lives. The Rajapakse regime overturned many of the successes of the 2002–2005 peace process. It is unclear what direction the Sri Lankan conflict will take at this point. The regime is pursuing a military solution to the conflict, and its complete disregard for civilian casualties from the minority communities is troubling and does not bode well for the future of Muslims. In pursuing its current policies, the regime is also distancing itself from the international community, and pressurizing tactics that civil society groups use via the international community may not, therefore, be effective anymore. Muslim civil society today is compelled to reorganize and strategize how it might best address community concerns in the new dispensation.

Notes

1. I thank Shreen Saroor and Mirak Raheem for sharing insights and information. This article is one part of our joint ongoing work on the Muslim community's concerns in Sri Lanka.
2. For a detailed description of the expulsion, see S. H. Hasbullah, *Muslim Refugees: The Forgotten People in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict* (Nuraicholai: Research and Action Forum for Social Development, 2001).
3. Catherine Brun, "Local Citizens or Internally Displaced Persons: Dilemmas of Long Term Displacement in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 16, No. 4 (2003): 376.
4. Press conference in Kilinochchi, April 2002.
5. Conversation with Moulawi Sufiyan, member of the Muslim community displaced from Jaffna, and currently politician and human rights activist. Temporary shelter at a school in Muttur.

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