

NEGOTIATING NATIONAL LANDSCAPES

Implications of anti-Muslim sentiments
and opportunities for reconciliation

Guided discussion

- Brevity – maximum of 3 minutes so prepare main points
- Respect – for diverse views as all opinions are valuable
- Breathe – could be strong emotions in the room
- Respond – don't interrupt

overview

1. Aim and intended outcomes
2. Background info
3. Piecing together community views
4. Summary
5. Strategy and partners
6. Wrap up and next steps

Muslims in Sri Lanka

- Sri Lankan ethnic Muslims (“Moors”) 9.3% of national population;
- 1.95 million Muslims, 2/3rds live outside of North & East and coexist with the Sinhalese (70% of population);
- Muslims in Sri Lanka since 7th century;
- Except for the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, no other notable conflict or violence recorded between Muslims and Sinhalese;
- Post-war period: wave of incidents (threats, intimidation, violence) targeting religious symbols, places of worship, clergy, especially against Muslims.

2014 Anti-Muslim Riots

- Kalutara District: Aluthgama, Beruwala, Dharga Town;
- Attacks on homes, shops, factories, mosques and nursery;
- Hundreds homeless; 10,000 people (8,000 Muslims, 2,000 Sinhalese) displaced by the riots;
- Riots followed rallies by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS);
- Mainstream media ordered to censor news;
- Muslim businesses in Colombo, North and East Provinces staged a hartal;
- *No-Limit* clothing store in Panadura burnt - Rs.400 mil damage.

Attacks on Islam

- Sep 2011 - 400 year old Muslim shrine, Anuradhapura (100);
- Apr 2012 - mosque in Dambulla (200);
- May 2012 - attack and demonstration against Imam at Dehiwala;
- Aug 2012 - burning of mosque in Unnichai, Batticaloa District;
- Aug 2012 - attacks and damage to mosque equipment in Wellampitiya, Colombo;
- Oct 2012 - burning of the inside of mosque at Malwathu Anuradhapura;
- Jan 2013 - protest to remove Malwathu mosque;
- Jan 2013 - defacing of a wall of the Meera Makkam mosque, Kandy;
- July 2013 - forced closure of Mahiyangana mosque – pork/stoning at Friday prayers;
- Aug 2013 - attacks on the Grandpass mosque in August 2013;
- Jun 2014 - attacks on people, homes, businesses (Aluthgama, Beruwala, Dharga Town);
- July 2015 - attack on mosque in Kandy;
- July 2015 - throwing of stones at mosque, Keththaarama, Colombo

Anti-Muslim incidents

- Hundreds of violent incidents - killing of Muslims, many injuries, destruction of places of worship, challenges to faith practices and duties;
- “Buddhist-cleansing of Sri Lanka” propagated by BBS and other extreme nationalist forces;
- Gnanasara Thero in Aluthgama, June 2014 - inciting Sinhalese to finish off the Muslim “Marakkalayas.” “If one ‘Marakkalaya’ lays a hand on a Sinhalese, that will be the end of all of them.”
- Late 2015 and ongoing - new strategy of “Sinha Le” (Sinhala blood) campaign to attack Muslims; poster campaign in public spaces, stickers on 3 wheelers, busses, vans, social media platforms;
- Muslims: “another other” and target of ethno-religious hatred and violence by vigilante, right-wing, ethno-nationalists claiming to protect Sinhala-Buddhist nation, race, and culture in Sri Lanka.

Historical incidents

- Root of anti-Muslim sentiments/violence by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists – envy of Muslim dominance in trade, business, economic prosperity (Marga Institute data early 1990s economic positions of ethnic communities roughly the same);
- During British rule - writers, dramatists, journalists, monks urge Sinhala people to boycott Muslim shops – result? 1915 riots and destruction of millions worth of trade and business properties of Muslims;
- Anti-Muslim sentiments, agitations, violent oppositions rose after 2012 census – 7.5% in 1981, 9.3 in 2012, predominantly Muslim county by 2060 (over 100 years the Muslim population > by 0.39%);
- Muslims historically submissive to Sinhalese majority.

Global context

- Spread of identity or ethno-politics (Trump, Islamophobia, increase of European neo-Facists);
- Insecurity caused by transition, change, loosening of traditional moorings, drive to affirm group bonds;
- Anti-Muslim sentiments in SL is a global trend – not going to go away if ignored (loss of votes);
- Anti-Muslim radicalism in Norway and “Islamization of Western Europe” with Norwegian funding for Sri Lanka and Myanmar;
- Western analysts: unless the Sinhala polity is divided, Western agendas cannot be realised;
- The US keeps track of Islamic groups and know of the Wahabist-Selafi incursions in Sri Lanka, and growing resentment against it by nationalist sections of the Sinhalese.

Challenges and dangers

- Government refuses to take legal action against hate speech/ incidents;
- Need to take counter-action against BBS and clones;
- Anti-Muslim campaign far more dangerous than previous one;
- Economic hardship of segments of Sinhala communities creates politics of envy and Muslim scapegoats;
- Present government steadily losing credibility;
- Vested interest for destabilisation through communal violence and regime change by Rajapaksas and cronies to escape jail and worse;
- Appeal to treatment of minorities on moral grounds will not succeed but economic consequences of Sinhalese racism on Sinhalese people.

Piecing together diverse views

1. Your related experiences and knowledge
2. Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim views of Muslims
3. Main emerging issues

Strategies and partners

1. What might prevent conflict?
2. Who are players / networks in and out of Sri Lanka?
3. What's are entry points?
4. Who is responsible?

Next steps