**Input to the Report on Anti-Muslim Hatred and Discrimination**

*by Alliance for Minorities (a collective of 08 Civil Society Organisations from North and East)*

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, and even more alarmingly since the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, Sri Lanka’s Muslim community has been targeted, vilified and attacked[[1]](#footnote-1). This report documents recent trends, state inaction or patronaging and a few positive steps taken by civil society actors in the wake of complete government silence.

1. **Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred**

Islamophobia in Sri Lanka is a convenient tool borrowed and adapted to support existing anti-Muslim hatred. For Sinhala nationalists, ending the war with the LTTE shifted the focus to a different minority community. Drawing on growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the region (from India to Thailand to Myanmar), radical monks like Gnanasara Thero propagated hate speech and incited riots against Muslims in 2014. These actions resonated with the Rajapaksa administration, which gave the perpetrators complete impunity.

Following the Easter Sunday attacks last year and the Rajapaksas’ subsequent return to power, hate speech and violence against the Muslim community are again on the rise. Proponents of this hate disseminate false propaganda about Muslim dress codes, perceived population growth, economic affluence and congregational gatherings to justify keeping Muslims under check.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, state-aligned media outlets have deliberately profiled the Muslim community. Since March 2020, two powerful media outlets denigrated Muslims as ‘Covid-19 carriers’ who ‘deliberately spread the Corona’. These outlets and other state-owned media publicised the identity of Muslims whenever a Muslim area came under lockdown or anytime a Muslim patient or decedent tested positive for Covid-19, whereas the identities of non-Muslim patients or community outbreaks were not disclosed.

Certain media outlets depicted past public gatherings of Muslims (mostly prayer gatherings) to misinform the country that Muslims were continuing to congregate and spread the virus. Later the lies were exposed as their projections of a ‘Muslim cluster/s’ did not materialise and in fact such ‘clusters’ originated from people coming from outside the country. Likewise, media stories magnifying and vilifying some returnees from Muslim religious gatherings in India and Indonesia turned out false when projected outbreaks did not materialize. However, the damage, in terms of societal stigmatisation, was done. For example:

1. A prominent mosque at the 2nd Cross Street, Colombo -11 was falsely accused of having had congregational prayers.
2. Articles were written in mainstream media depicting Muslims as the Covid carriers and spreaders (One Judicial Medical Officer who is in charge of the hospital that treats serious Covid-19 infected cases said Covid-19 dead bodies can be used as biological weapons if Muslims are given the option of burial[[2]](#footnote-2)).
3. Even the medical profession (the GMOA) in an exit strategy report to the government racially profiled Muslims and Muslim majority areas as having the most potential to germinate and/or spread Covid-19 and prescribed special procedures. As this drew criticism from independent persons the GMOA subsequently dropped these recommendations[[3]](#footnote-3).
4. **Social attitude, hate speech, attacks and violence against Muslims**

Since 2009, there has been a vast increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence by extremist Buddhist monks and Sinhala mobs.

1. A few Buddhist monks use very harsh, derogatory and inciting language to single out Muslims as a community that seeks special treatment whenever Muslims push for recognition of their religious and cultural rights. Muslims are called “Thambiyas[[4]](#footnote-4)”—incendiary monks say “they all must be killed”, “anyone associated with Rishad Bathiudeen (Member of Parliament) must be killed”, “are the thambiyas a big race”, “why should thambiyas given special treatment?”, etc. In a society that venerates Buddhist monks their words matter and aren’t questioned. As a result, the state too takes no action and provides impunity to these monks.
2. Such hate speech is taken to a higher level when powerful media houses subtly and/or directly promote and patronise incendiary monks.
3. The above is compounded by widespread and systematic hate campaigns, fake news and false accusations against Muslims publicised and propagated in social media and popular mainstream Sinhala and English newspapers. As per the Hashtag Generation, which monitors social media, from April to October 2020 63.6% of hate speech in Sri Lanka was directed against Muslims.
4. The numerical divides between the Sinhala-Buddhist majority and other faith followers is so huge that minorities have little sway or public support. Often, they are intimidated and coerced into submission or resign themselves to be subservient communities.
5. On May 5, 2019 weeks after the Easter Sunday attacks, several Muslim-owned shops and vehicles were vandalized and set ablaze in Negombo. These attacks were followed by further anti-Muslim attacks on 12th and 13th May in few Muslim towns in north-western province where one Muslim was killed and hundreds of Muslim owned shops and houses destroyed. Qurans and Madrasas were set ablaze by mobs while police officers watched and largely stood by. Attacks continued despite curfew being imposed, raising concerns over the failure to protect Muslims and collusion by security forces with the mobs[[5]](#footnote-5).
6. On 22 May 2019, then-President Maithripala Sirisena, arbitrarily pardoned convicted hate monger in chief, the head of the BBS, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero[[6]](#footnote-6). Gnanasara Thero signed a pact in 2014 with Myanmar’s feared leader of the 969, Ashin Wirathu. He was in prison for obstructing justice, threatening a Sinhalese human rights defender seeking justice for the abduction and killing of her journalist husband by state security forces.
7. After his release, on June 3rd, 2019, Gnanasara Thero joined hands with vitriolic monk and Member of Parliament Rathana Thero, who was fasting unto death demanding the resignation of 3 prominent Muslim politicians. This duo galvanised Sinhala mobs in Kandy and threatened immediate chaos. To avert widespread violence against the Muslim community two Provincial Governors and all the 9 Ministers and deputy ministers resigned[[7]](#footnote-7).
8. This uncontrolled (and state sanctioned) hate speech and push against the Muslims are sometimes aided and abetted by hapless and spineless Muslim religious[[8]](#footnote-8) and political leaders who also cajole and advise the community to bow down their heads and wait to live another day, as it were.

Attacks and hate speech are also directed at Muslims who hail from the Tamil-majority North and East:

1. Northern Muslims who were evicted by the LTTE in 1990 resettled in further south in Puttalam. During the November 16th, 2019 Presidential election, these Muslims were targeted and attacked while traveling north to Mannar and Mullaithivu to vote.[[9]](#endnote-1) Sinhala mobs, who happened to be supporters of both SLPP and Rajapaksa, shot and threw stones at their buses while the buses were travelling to and from the polling locations.[[10]](#endnote-2) Many of the injured were women and children. Attacks like this are likely to deter evicted Muslims from voting in the forthcoming elections. Ironically, it was Northern Muslims’ insistence on unity of the country that led to their eviction from the north. For this allegiance, the State in 2013 took over their original homesteads and private lands by official gazette and now accuses these Muslims of illegally clearing lands on their return to their homes in the north after 30 years .
2. In the Eastern province, Muslims are accused of abducting young Tamil girls and marrying them. Such rumours exacerbate tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities. It also ostracizes couples who date or marry across community lines.
3. **Discriminatory application of laws**

The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) are usually applied differently or adversely when it comes to minorities and/or Muslims in Sri Lanka. For example:

1. A Muslim woman was arbitrarily detained for 30 days for wearing a dress that had a design similar to a ship’s wheel. She was accused by police of misusing the ‘dharma chakkara’ (Buddhist wheel symbol) to insult Buddhism (ICCPR).
2. Web-journalist Ramzi Razeek, who had a reputation of writing against violence, was apprehended and incarcerated when one of his postings used the word, ‘Jihad’. This term was taken out of context and he was incarcerated without bail, despite him having serious health complications, for a very long time (ICCPR).
3. Immediately after the Easter Sunday Bombings, about 2200 Muslims were arrested and detained under newly imposed Emergency Regulations (ER) and the PTA. Mosques and madrasas across the country were raided by security forces and arrests made without due legal process. Some Islamic school students were arrested for having books with Arabic scripts and qasida.
4. To date over 100 Muslims remain in custody since the Easter attacks with no specific charges lodged or trial proceedings commenced. Some amongst them are underage and women. All are held on allegations that they had connection to National Tawheed Jamath, whose leader blew himself up in the Easter attacks.
5. Since the Easter attacks, 4 investigative committees/commissions have been appointed to find out the truth and culprits behind the said bombings. Because none of these commissions has uncovered the truth thus far, Muslims as a whole continue to be blamed, exacerbating anti Muslim sentiments

**Other laws, regulations and government fiats**

1. After the Easter attacks, the government banned women’s face-veils under ER (a pregnant mother was arrested for covering her face in Puttalam) and spread racist campaigns on social media over Muslim women’s dress code. As a result, the safety of Muslim women who chose to wear Islamic dress reduced. Even though ER has been lifted, Muslim women continue to be harassed for Islamic dress. As a result, many women opted to remove their face veils and head scarves to have mobility.
2. On 29th May 2019, the Ministry of Public Administration issued a circular asking women government officers to wear only Sarees and prohibiting Muslim women officers from wearing Abaya or Nikab or even a Shalwar Kameez with shawls on their heads. Although this circular was withdrawn after many complaints to the Human Rights Commission, Muslim women officers continue to face difficulties and some have resigned their government jobs.
3. In Covid, Muslims in Sri Lanka have been denied dignity in death. Despite WHO guidance and practices all over the world, the government mandated cremation of Covid bodies pursuant to an official gazette. To date over 60 Muslim dead bodies have been cremated and many without family consent.
4. A new law is soon to be enacted to stop slaughtering cows for human consumption. This law is perceived to target Muslims, who enjoy a consumer-driven monopoly in the beef trade.
5. A Muslim youth was arrested for having a Bible in his study. Another Muslim youth in the same area was arrested for having a pair of binoculars.
6. A Muslim tailor and two small garment factory owners were arrested for having in their possession cut pieces and fabrics that are similar to the army’s camouflage uniform. The factory owner was tortured in custody and a police news release tarnished his name and business.
7. A farther and son were detained under PTA for having 234 grams of Chlorine, which the military thought was C-4 explosive.

While Muslims continue to be targeted and arbitrarily detained, none of the identified culprits behind anti Muslim attacks have been charged. The State keeps patronising the violent monks who hate monger the Muslims and grant bail and pardon to these monks who went to prison for various other crimes.

On June 2nd 2020, by Gazette No. 2178/17, a Task Force for the Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province was established. The Task-Force has been in the forefront measuring lands under the pretext of  preserving archaeological sites and Buddhists heritage revival and on the verge of evicting around 300 Muslim families who have valid deeds for their lands. This pan-Sinhala Task Force comprises of monks, military and professionals. Ampara is a Muslim majority area and the Task Force is intentionally undermining the multi-ethnic identity in the province with a possible attempt to take away Muslim and Tamil communities' lands and in violation of 13th amendment to the consitution.

Apart from the PTA a more rigorous Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) is in the pipeline. The Muslim community is concerned that the CTA will be framed against the backdrop of supposed ISIS presence and a need to protect national security and sovereignty. Broadly framed, the CTA might allow any Muslim or minority member who attempts to counter Islamophobia or hatemongering to be framed as a terrorist. This is not an idle fear – the arrest and continued detention of lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah’s stands as a cautionary example.

1. **Multiple discrimination and hatred suffered by Muslims in vulnerable situations**

Unfortunately, vilification and hatemongering is also directed *among* Muslims. With Wahhabism on the rise, anyone perceived as not in line with that thinking is vilified, attacked, disowned and even ostracised. Some are violently attacked by Muslims themselves (belonging to the Shafi sect). Radical, extremist, or intolerant practices are fostered by leading theological groups such as All Ceylon Jammiathul Ulema. These Ulemas have been a major stumbling block for any progressive reforms within the community specially eliminating Female genital mutilation, reforming Madrasa education and the archaic Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA).

Challenging these groups becomes a challenge in the current climate. The current government came into power on a platform of one country, one law. Muslim women’s groups have been advocating for progressive reforms to the MMDA for over 30 years to protect the rights of women and children while safeguarding cultural traditions. These groups now fear that any push for reform would result in wholesale repeal of the MMDA.

1. **Good practices in tackling anti-Muslim hatred**

With the Sri Lankan state playing virtually no role in protecting Muslims and tackling Islamophobia, civil society and international organisations have taken the lead, by:

1. Immediate reporting and complaining about anti-Muslim hate speech and fake news to Facebook and successfully remove some dangerous content.
2. Formation of multi community youth groups through social media to counter fake and false allegations especially regarding the arrest of lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah, Journalist Ramizi Razeek and Doctor Shafi Shihabdeen.
3. Releasing a scholarly work titled, “does Quran promote violence?” in Sinhala to counter wild allegations by Gnanasara Thero and other extremist monks and reach a broad audience.
4. Uniting Catholic clergy, nuns and Muslim community leaders to avoid tension and violence in Negombo, where more than 100 Catholic worshipers were killed in the Easter attacks.
5. Planning to bring together a Buddhist monk and Islamic scholar to explain Quranic depictions and correct wrong narrations of Islam (on hold due to pandemic).
6. Gathering volunteers and donations from the Muslim community to reconstruct churches damaged by the Easter bombings as a goodwill gesture to repent for the atrocious crimes committed in their names.
7. Gathering Muslims and Tamils in Batticaloa (Eastern province) to counter racism and reiterate themes of coexistence and communal harmony.
8. Systematically documenting and lobbying the OIC, Special Rapporteurs, and UN Agencies to address anti-Muslim violence, hatemongering, Islamophobia with government actors.
9. Pursuing all avenues for domestic relief before the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and local courts, e.g., to cancel the government circular banning Hijab and Abaya and now over 13 fundamental rights violation cases filed in Supreme Court to stop forceful cremation of corona infected Muslims Janazahs.

1. . <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/anti-muslim-hatred-clouding-the-fight-against-corona/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://english.theleader.lk/news/690-small-fear-whether-the-dead-bodies-with-the-virus-can-be-used-as-biological-weapons-dr-channa-perera-tells-bbc [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.dailypost.lk/under-fire-gmoa-makes-quick-turnaround/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Derogatory term for Muslims [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-anti-muslim-riots-kill-one-despite-curfew/article27123419.ece [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/5/22/sri-lanka-president-pardons-hardline-buddhist-monk [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/03/world/asia/sri-lanka-muslim-ministers-resign.html [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://colombotimes.net/ashes-from-cremated-body-of-a-muslim-could-be-buried-with-islamic-rites-sheikh-rizwie-mufthi/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Muslim Voters Attacked in Sri Lanka Presidential Election*, The Public’s Radio (Nov. 16, 2019), <https://thepublicsradio.org/article/muslim-voters-attacked-as-sri-lanka-elects-president>; *Sri Lankan Presidential Election: Buses Carrying Muslim Voters Attacked*, The Guardian (Nov. 16, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/16/sri-lanka-presidential-election-gunmen-fire-on-buses-carrying-muslim-voters>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
10. *Id.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)