Political Buddhism, Islamic Orthodoxy and Open Economy: the Toxic Triad in Sinhalese-Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

After nearly a millennium of uninterrupted harmony between the Sinhalese and Muslims in Sri Lanka, economic and ethno-religious developments after the 1970s have created an atmosphere of communal tension between the two groups. While a new wave of political Buddhism with its militant offshoot amongst the Sinhalese and the growth of a rigid Islamic orthodoxy amongst the Muslims have provided the ethno-religious dimension to this tension the post-1977 open economy has added an economic dimension to it. The interplay of this toxic triad is a reminder of a similar scenario that produced the first Sinhalese-Muslim racial riots in the country in 1915. Unlike the first, which occurred in the colonial context, the current one, which if not arrested, will not only jeopardize Sinhalese-Muslim harmony but also will result in adverse consequences in Sri Lanka’s relations with Muslim countries.

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. The pluralist make up of this country was built over a thousand years. Islam/Muslims and Buddhism/Sinhalese have coexisted in the island for at least since the 8th century CE. For nearly one thousand years this coexistence was nothing but harmonious - a nonpareil record in the annals of Asian history. The rise of political Buddhism in the guise of Sinhalese-Buddhist national consciousness during the 1880s disrupted that harmony in 1915. After independence in 1948 however, lessons learnt from 1915, imperatives of electoral democratic politics, and ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils necessitated an alliance of convenience between the Muslims and the Sinhalese. That alliance too became tenuous in and after the 1970s. While the return of an open market economy in 1977 intensified economic competition amongst different ethnic groups, the military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 produced an aura of triumphalism amongst the Sinhalese-Buddhists who, with support from militant elements of the Sangha, have become extremely aggressive and hegemonic. On the Muslim side, a
wave of ultrareligious orthodoxy propagated by the evangelical *Tabigh Jamaat* (TJ) from the early 1960s and Saudi-backed Wahhabism from the 1980s has injected an ideology of universal *umma*-consciousness and a trend of social ‘exclusivism’ among many of their followers which runs directly in contrast to the indigenization and integration trajectories of the past. The political implications of this ‘exclusivism’ in a society grappling with competing ethno-nationalisms have so far escaped the attention of scholars.

Political Buddhism with its current militant offshoot is the ‘New Buddhism’ and the product of a Sinhalese-Buddhist consciousness that developed during the British colonial era. It is structured upon an artificially manufactured “mythohistory” (Thambiah S.J, 1986) and questionable archaeology and cemented with an assumed sense of Sinhalese racial superiority (Jayawardena K, 1986; Bartholomeusz, T.J. and de Silva C.R, 1998; Somasundaram D, 2010). This, in other words, is the Sri Lankan version of the ‘political abuse of history’ referred to by Romila Thapar in the context of Hindutva in India (Panikkar K.N, 2012). Like political Islam in the Middle East and in other parts of the Muslim world, political Buddhism in Sri Lanka depends on an ideology based on “a set of systematically fashioned beliefs and symbols of Sinhala Buddhists” (Jayawardena K, 1986, p. 137) with its ultimate objective of converting Sri Lanka into a Sinhala-Dharmadvipa, in which all non-Sinhalese and non-Buddhists would become the distant “other”. No wonder that one of the former presidents of the country is reported to have called the minorities “creepers” (Murari 2012, p.144). This hegemonic ideology, which once existed only in the thought-domain of the articulated and politically motivated Buddhist elite, has now, since the end of the civil war and through vigorous political and religious propaganda, permeated the edifice of the broad Sinhalese-Buddhist society - a foretoken to future political and social instability.

On the other hand, orthodox Islam, based on a “literalist-exclusivist” (Safi O, 2003) discourse of its primary sources namely, the Quran and the *sunnah* (sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammad), and indoctrinated by local and imported religious functionaries through a multiplicity of Islamic institutions, has injected, particularly after the 1970s, a strong *umma*-consciousness, which conceals within this imagined monolithic religious identity the ethnic diversity
of the Muslim community - a move, as one historian argues, “from vague initiations of identity and difference to pride in collective membership” (Wickremasinghe N, 2006, p.x). The inner dynamics of this umma-consciousness, with its ritual-oriented religious conservatism has become problematic in the face of an ideologically constructed Sinhalese-Buddhist consciousness. The open-economy within which these two phenomena operate has made Sinhalese-Muslim relations in Sri Lanka even more volatile with international implications. What follows is a historical but critical review of the ethno-religious and economic complexity that governs Sinhalese-Muslim relations in Sri Lanka.

A Millennium of Buddhist-Muslim Harmony

The history of Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka dates back, according to one local Muslim scholar, to seventh century CE (Shukri, 1990, p.203). It was neither conquest nor conversion but commerce and curiosity that brought the early Muslims to the shores of Sarandib, a name bestowed by the Arabs of yore upon this fertile island. While an abundance of forest resources, precious stones, and spices lured the commercial instincts of Arab and Persian traders, the curiosity of sufis or Muslim ascetics and Arab travellers drove them to visit Samanalakanda (butterfly-mountain) or popularly known as Adam’s Peak in the central highlands where the legendary footprint of Adam, the father of humanity, according to Muslim believers, is found. The local Buddhist community and their rulers always welcomed these foreigners and allowed them, for economic and political reasons, to settle permanently in their territory. The Muslims fulfilled the need for a merchant class that was in short supply in the largely agricultural economies of the ancient and medieval Buddhist kingdoms. “They were a dominant influence”, writes K. M. de Silva, an eminent historian of Sri Lanka, “on the island’s international trade in the period of the Polonnaruva kings, a position which they retained till the early decades of the sixteenth century ...” (de Silva, 1981, p. 72). With Muslims came Islam and the Buddhist rulers allowed the newcomers to practice their religion as long as it did not hurt the “religious susceptibilities of the majority of the people among whom they lived” (Paranavitana. S, 1959-60, p. 769). A spiritual congruence between the simplicity and teachings of the sufis and that of the Buddhist monks made each other’s social accommodation less
problematic. For example, the saffron dress of the monk and the coarse woollen gown of the *sufi* demonstrated the wearers’ austere living, while the Buddhist belief in Nirvana or no self went parallel to the concept of *fana* or annihilation of the ego in Sufism. In a fascinating study on *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*, Johan Elverskog (2010) has meticulously recorded how these two religions interacted with each other and cross-fertilized to produce a cultural synthesis in South East Asia, in contrast to the popular history of conflict between them. The history of Islam in Sri Lanka in the ancient and medieval times would also be a fitting laboratory to test Elverskog’s findings.

As years rolled, Muslim settlements increased in number and from the coastal areas they moved to the interior. The Arab Muslims, at times, as in 1238 under the reign of Bhuvanekabahu I, were even admitted to the foreign diplomatic missions of Buddhist kings. They became an invaluable asset to the local monarchs, economically as well as politically, and in establishing international contacts particularly with the Islamic Caliphate. In the words of Lorna Dewaraja, another reputed historian of the country, “... a group of itinerant traders, initially foreign in race, religion and culture became an indispensable and integral part of the Sri Lankan society” (Dewaraja, 1994, p.3). Over the years and “as a result of intermarriage between them and the local population, they became Indo-Arab in ‘ethnic’ character rather than purely Arab” (de Silva, 1981, p. 91). The erosion of their Arab ethnicity however did not lead to a dilution of their Islamic identity.

Until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century followed by the Dutch in the 17th, Muslims in Sri Lanka virtually had no enemies. After comparing their status and position with their counterparts in Thailand, Burma, and China, Dewaraja finds in Sri Lanka, “a state of peaceful co-existence, unique in an era of religious persecution and rivalry ...” (Dewaraja, 1994, p. 14). With Buddhism dominating the spiritual horizon and Hinduism holding second place, Islam, with its *sufi* dimension and rituals, fitted in cosily into the cultural mosaic of the island. The Muslims were so popular and prosperous in that overwhelmingly Buddhist environment until the entry of the Portuguese kin the 16th century that it provoked Emerson Tennent, a British civil servant in 19th century Sri Lanka, to volunteer the hypothesis that “but for this timely appearance of a Christian power in the island, Ceylon, instead of being a
possessing the British Crown, might at the present day have been a Mohamedan kingdom under the rule of some Arabian adventurer” (Tennent, vol.1, p. 633). Incidentally, this supposition is somewhat similar to what Edward Gibbon imagined, in a rather panic mood, about Islam in Europe after the Battle of Poitiers in 733 (David Levering Lewis, 2008, p.173).

The integration of Muslims with the local Sinhalese population must have been so tightly-knit that it could not prevent the conversion of some Sinhalese to Islam. A British intellectual, Reverend James Cordiner who lived in the island between 1799 and 1804, observed that “The Cingalese who profess the religion of Mahomet appear to be a mixed race” (Cordiner, 1983, vol.1: p 117). Whether there were conversions in the reverse direction is not known. However, in a country where Buddhism has become synonymous with ethnic Sinhalese (Obayasekera, 1979, pp279-313; Victor Ivan, 2009, p.261; Bartholomeusz and de Silva, 1998) Cordiner’s observation demonstrates the interreligious fluidity in medieval Sri Lanka.

During the Portuguese and Dutch rule, between 1505 and 1796, the Sri Lankan Muslims suffered economically as well as culturally, more so under the Portuguese than under the Dutch. While the monopolization of inland and overseas trade by both colonial powers deprived the local Muslims of their vital means of economic subsistence, the evangelical spirit of the conquerors bent on converting the native souls to Christianity meant a double jeopardy and an existential threat to Muslims and Islam. It was at this juncture that the Muslims who were living peacefully amongst coastal Buddhists began to move to the interior and were warmly received by the Buddhist kings of Kandy. Dewaraja’s authoritative account cited above and her work on the Kandyan Kingdom (Dewaraja, 1982) once again comes to our aid to assess the rapid indigenization of Muslims in the Kandyan territories. Muslim tenants working in lands belonged to Buddhist temples, Muslim business acumen harnessed by the state to increase its domestic product, and Muslim officials employed in various capacities by successive Buddhist kings are unique instances of interreligious harmony that prevailed in medieval Sri Lanka. In essence, the Buddhist worshipers’ prayer dhammam saranam kachchame (surrender to the path of dhamma) found amity and congruence with the Muslim believers’ prayer ihdhinassiraatal mustakim (guide us along the straight path).
There was, however, one novel development during this period which was to play a critical role in Muslim politics in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was the transformation of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity from Indo-Arab to Moor, thanks to the malevolence of the Portuguese. The name Moor derives from the Latin root *mauri* which originally referred to the inhabitants of the Roman province of Mauretania, which included today’s Western Algeria and North-East Morocco. After the 7th century the Latin *mauri* through its Spanish counterpart *moro* was employed to denote the followers of Islam who after the death of the Prophet Muhammad overran Spain and Morocco. The Portuguese bestowed this epithet “indiscriminately upon the Arabs and their descendants, whom, in the sixteenth century, they found established as traders in every port on the Asian and African coast” (Sir James Emerson Tennent, 1860, vol. 1, p. 630). Like the medieval name Saracen, Moor was also used by the Christian powers as a sobriquet of denigration and, as Edward Said writes, “as a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient” (Edward W. Said, 1991, p. 60). Ironically, this appellation, because of political necessity in the 1880s, was ennobled by the Muslim elite and became the proud nomenclature of its community’s ethnic identity (Ali, 1997).

In spite of the anti-Muslim policies of the Portuguese and Dutch the cordiality and harmony that prevailed between the Buddhists and Muslims continued unabated both in the colonised territories of the maritime region as well as in the interior of the independent Kandyan Kingdom. With the fall of Kandy to the British in 1815 the entire island became a British colony and the economic forces of capitalism and urbanization unleashed under the new rulers began to create inter and intra-communal social fissures and economic tensions. The economic inequities of an unrestrained market economy ultimately brought to an end in 1915 a millennium of Buddhist-Muslim harmony.

**Political Buddhism and Growth of Anti-Muslim Sentiments**

Political Buddhism, like political Islam, represents a desire, at least among sections of the Buddhist elite, to restructure society and its polity on the foundation of Buddhist principles and philosophy. This, as a distinct phenomenon and a movement, did not exist in ancient Sri Lanka, because Buddhism, since its introduction in 3rd century CE, always had the patronage of the Sinhalese monarchs. Even after the fall of the maritime regions to Western
Christian powers Buddhism enjoyed state patronage in the Kandyan Kingdom until 1815. It was only after the fall of Kandy in that year and with it the entire nation to the British that state patronage shifted away from Buddhism towards Christianity. With a minority religion enjoying state support the majority Buddhists naturally felt discontented at the deprivation of a hereditary privilege.

The anti-Muslim sentiments that developed during the last quarter of the 19th century were a bi-product of the Buddhist religious and cultural awakening that started in the 1860s primarily as an anti-Christian movement. Historically, the first wave of Buddhist revivalism is said to have sprung during the reign of Kirti Sri Rajasingha (1739-1781) in the Kandyan Kingdom (Ivan, 2009, p.58). The objective of this revivalism was to restore the order of the Sangha, which “had dwindled into a nebulous state, devoid of bhikkus with higher ordination and no leadership” (Ivan, ibid). However, unlike the 18th century revivalism its successor in the 19th was mixed with politics. In both waves, Buddhist monks played a dominant role. Weliwita Saranankara Thera in the first and Hikkaduwa Sri Sumangala Thera and Weligama Siri Sumangala Thera in the second were some of the leading spiritual heads in these movements (Ivan, 2009).

There were two notable developments in the 19th century as far as the Moors were concerned. One was an increase in the arrival of Muslim traders and businessmen from the Indian sub-continent who were officially called Coast Moors because of their coastal origins in today’s Tamil Nadu, even though not all the Indians came from that part. Their entry into Sri Lanka which was largely curtailed if not totally prohibited by the Portuguese and Dutch was now made easier in the wake of loosening immigration restrictions by the British. The growing demands of a plantation economy for wholesale and retail services made their arrival timely and profitable. By the end of the 1800s the number of Coast Moors, according to census reports, increased from 27,000 in 1801 to 33,000 in 1911, which was 11 and 12 percent of the total Moor population respectively. The second development was a radical transformation of the official image of the Moors from negative to positive. Unlike the Portuguese and Dutch who were totally inimical towards Islam and negative about the Moors, the British on the contrary developed a positive image of this community because of the latter’s hereditary commercial traits which the
British realised could be harnessed and utilised to the benefit of an evolving commercial capitalism. In the official reports and publications for instance, while the Moors were popularly portrayed as enterprising, active, hardworking, dynamic, and business minded, the Buddhist Sinhalese in contrast were pictured as slovenly, indolent, and unenterprising (Ali, 1987). Needless to say, that this subtle exercise in differentiated ethnic imagery was another dimension of the colonial policy of divide and rule.

Simultaneously, within the majority Sinhalese community a different image about the Moors gained notoriety in the 19th century, thanks mostly to the economic behaviour and religious practices of the recently arrived Coast Moors. The opening of Sri Lanka’s interior through a net work of roads and railways, the development of Colombo as the administrative and commercial capital, and mushrooming of towns and markets in various parts of the island created multiple profit-making opportunities for investors, businessmen and entrepreneurs. To the traditional Moor businessmen these opportunities signalled a boon. Muslim settlements moved closer to the cities and towns and sections of their residences operated as shops and store-houses. The ubiquity of Muslim peddlers, Muslim tavalam-men (traders who went in convoys of pack oxen) and retail shopkeepers in the Sinhalese villages, and the presence of Muslim wholesalers in Colombo, stamped the Muslims as a business community, which characterization, in spite of its factual inaccuracy, is still held as heavenly truth by numerous Sri Lankan scholars, journalists, and politicians (Ali, 1980).

In the meantime and towards the end of the 19th century the profit-maximizing behaviour of the Coast Moors who were mostly ‘birds of passage’ and whose business establishments penetrated deep into the rural regions added to the economic hardship of many Sinhalese villagers, whose economic survival had already become precarious because of the unfair competition for natural and human resources stemmed from a state sponsored plantation sector. “The Mohamedan traders, who come from South-India and return thither when they have money by retail trading”, wrote Sir Robert Chalmers, the British Governor of Ceylon from 1913-16 to the Secretary of State in London, “have always been viewed by the villagers with the feelings entertained at all times and in all lands towards transitory aliens who make money out of local
peasantry by supplying their wants at ‘the shop’ and frequently securing mortgages of the lands of thriftless debtors” (Colonial Office, Cd. 8167). It was in this climate of rural economic hardship and indebtedness in an open economy that a group of Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalists like David Hewawitharana Dharmapala, who was initially brought up in a Christian environment but later became an ardent Buddhist and changed his name to Anagarika Dharmapala, directed their attack on all foreigners in the country including Muslims (Ali, 1881). In the speeches and writings of Dharmapala and his coreligionists one can see the seedlings of political Buddhism and the emergence of a Sinhalese-Buddhist consciousness.

“The Muhammadan ... is an alien to the Sinhalese by religion, race and language. He traces his origin to Arabia, whilst the Sinhalese traces his origin to India and Aryan sources ... To the Sinhalese without Buddhism death is preferable”, wrote Dharmapala (1965, p. 540). He did not always differentiate between the Coast Moors and indigenised Moors. In one instance he wrote, “The Mohammedans”, which included all Muslims, “an alien people ... by Shylockian methods became prosperous, like the Jews”. Then with the same breadth he targeted the Coast Moors and said, “The alien South Indian Mohammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected villager without any experience in trade ... and the result is that Mohammedan thrives and the son of soil goes to the wall” (Ibid). Even though Dharmapala later denied that he ever advocated hatred against the Mohammedans but held them as exponents of “energy, industry, perseverance, usefulness, (and) cleanliness” in contrast to “the indolent, ignorant, (and) illiterate Sinhalese villager” (op.cit., p.721), he nevertheless warned that “there will always be bad blood between the Moors and the Sinhalese” (op.cit., p. 541). The anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by him and his co-agitators like Walisinghe Harischandra and Piyadasa Sirisena, and which were popularised through Sirisena’s paper Sinhala Jatiya had taken a life of its own in making the Muslims the “far other’. When the riots started in 1915 the distinction between the Coast Moor and the Ceylon Moor began to fade away (Wickremasinghe N, 2006, p.120). As a result, a total of 25 Muslims were murdered, 189 were injured, 350 houses and 17 mosques were set ablaze, and another 50 mosques suffered some sort of structural damage (Ali, 1981). Even though the riots were “a reflection of economic dislocation, price rises and the political ferment of the period” (Jayawardena K, op.cit., p.136) it
is undeniable that a politicised and popularised Buddhist consciousness rallied the Buddhist masses and set them against the Muslims. “The Tambies”, a colloquial reference to the Muslims, “are insulting our nationality and our religion. We must harass the Tambies, and they must be driven out of Ceylon” was the call of the Buddhist agitators (Quoted in Wickramasinghe N, op.cit., p. 119).

Political Buddhism after Independence

Political Buddhism and Sinhalese-Buddhist consciousness, which in the early decades of the 20th century acted only as an enabler of national anti-colonial and pro-independence struggle grew into a movement of ethno-nationalist Buddhist ideology and played a decisive role in competitive party politics of post-independent Sri Lanka (Somasundaram, 2010). In this toxic mix of ethnicity, religion and politics the involvement of the Sangha in politics received institutional blessing from the Declaration of the Vidyalankara Privena in February 1946. This declaration, which was triggered by a public speech made a month earlier by a left-lenient scholar-monk, Walpola Rahula, in response to a criticism by the first future Prime Minister of the country, D.S. Senanayake, who attacked such monks for appearing on the campaign platforms of Trotskyites and Communists, could be viewed as a fatwa from the Sangha sanctifying active participation of Buddhist monks in politics. The declaration that was drafted by another scholar-monk, Yakkaduwa Sri Pragnarama Nayaka Thera, and was approved by the Board of teachers of the Privena included the following paragraph in the final document:

We believe that politics have embraced all fields of human activity directed towards the public weal. No one will dispute that the work of the promotion of the religion is the duty of the Bhikkhus. It is clear that the welfare of the religion depends on the welfare of the people who profess that religion. History bears evidence to the fact that whenever the Sinhalese nation which was essentially a Buddhist nation was prosperous, Buddhism also flourished. We therefore declare that it is
nothing but fitting for Buddhists (Bhikkus?) to identify themselves ... (in) activities conducive to the welfare of our people whether these activities can be labelled politics or not, as long as they do not constitute an impediment to the religious life of Bhikkus. (Emphasis added.)

The emphatic assertion that Sri Lanka is ‘essentially a Buddhist nation’ and that the Buddhist monks should ‘identify themselves’ with political activities, paved the way for the entry of militant ‘political monks’ into national political arena after the 1970s. It is this militancy coinciding with the rise of an Islamic orthodoxy and an open economy that is now endangering Sinhalese-Muslim amity.

Political Buddhism with its minority militant offshoot became particularly active after the introduction of the open economy in the 1980s, the materialist face of President Jayewardena’s dharmista (righteous) society. Open economies with unregulated markets create economic inequities everywhere, and even in 1915 it was the economic disparity engendered by commercial capitalism that led the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists to target their attack on Muslim business community. Once again, a similar scenario was on the making in the 1980s. The unrestrained opportunities opened for free enterprise and market competition in the Jayewardena era reinvigorated the commercial traits of several ethnic groups including the Muslims that were forced to lie subdued under the Socialist programs of the previous left-coalition. In the open economy environment of the 1980s which continues till now, the drive for competitive economic advantage invariably translated itself into a contest for business supremacy among the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese bourgeoisie. Of the three, it was the ubiquitous presence of Muslim enterprises in the Sinhalese areas that became a source of envy and irritation to Sinhalese-Buddhist chauvinists. Even the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), founded by a group of Sinhalese-Buddhist youth in the 1960s as a class conscious Marxist revolutionary movement, in spite of its initial revolutionary slogans and internationalism, later became captive to the prevailing ultra-nationalist and chauvinist Buddhist tendencies. The JVP recruited young Buddhist monks and
organised economic boycott campaigns demanding the Sinhalese consumers not to patronize Muslim shops and businesses. Such anti-Muslim attitude was also expressed with subtlety by an eminent Buddhist academic, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, in his criticism of the open economy model of Jayewardena. In attacking the government’s economic policy Sarachchandra specifically highlighted the indignity of exporting Sinhalese female labour to Muslim Middle East (Ediriweera Sarachchandra, 1982). When the President held an All-Party Conference to resolve the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic issue politically, instead of opting for a military solution as urged by sections of the Sangha, radical monks like Labuduwe Siridhamma, Maduluwawe Sobhita and Walpola Rahula joined forces to rally the Sinhalese masses against the government. According to Ananda Abeysekara, Rahula declared that the Sangha was ready to lay down their lives and that if peaceful avenues did not work, another “weapon” would be used to wage a battle all over the country. Sobhita later identified that weapon as the monks’ sacrifice of their own lives (Abeysekara, 2001). The Buddhist clergy, at least some sections of it, was obviously becoming militant. In the years that followed it was this militancy of a chauvinist Buddhist minority that fuelled anti-Muslim protests and violence.

**Muslim Politics and Political Buddhism**

The local Muslim elite in Sri Lanka learnt a bitter lesson from the 1915 episode. When the Coast Moors came under attack from the Sinhalese mob, some members of the elite, in the name of Islamic brotherhood, identified themselves with their Indian counterpart, even though Muslim businesses belonged to Ceylon Moors also suffered at the hands of their Indian brethren. One Muslim leader who openly expressed his reservation against this Islamic identity was Razik Freed (1893-1984), who was an eyewitness to the 1915 tragedy and who was to dominate Sri Lankan Muslim politics until 1960. He demonstrated his disapproval in 1948, when the Ceylon Citizenship Bill came for debate in the Senate. On the day of the debate, 14 September, Razik, who was to emplane that afternoon for his pilgrimage to Mecca, made his hurried presence in the Senate and spoke, “we, the Ceylon Moors have suffered most in the past for want of a Citizenship Bill. We ... have been treated very badly by certain people, under the guise of Muslim brotherhood. We have, very unfortunately, played ourselves into the hands of other people” (Hansard,
1948). He was more specific in his allegation when he delivered another speech later that year. “The Ceylon Moors” he said, “had a flourishing trade in main street Pettah barely 40 years ago; but today you find the whole of the trade in Pettah, in the hands of non-Ceylon traders” (Hansard, 1948). Razik’s ethnic parochialism also set the tone for future parliamentary strategy of Muslim leaders in navigating through the confrontational Sinhalese-Tamil ethno-nationalisms.

With ethnic politics driving a wedge between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities from the 1950s Muslim leaders showed “gradual acceptance of a polity dominated by the Sinhalese and a reluctance to be assimilated within the larger Tamil-speaking community” (Wickremasinghe N, 2006, p. 145). This strategy was later translated almost into an electioneering slogan by another prominent Muslim leader when he said, “divided they are, we swim; united they are, we sink”. Sometimes described as pragmatic politics this strategy undoubtedly yielded several benefits to the Muslim community. The years from 1950s to the 1970s could be described as the honeymoon period of Muslim-Sinhalese relationship in independent Sri Lanka. Politically the community’s parliamentary representation, except in 1970, never failed to keep pace with its population strength. Even in electorates where the Sinhalese were in majority, like Galagedera and Akurana, a Muslim was able to win a parliamentary seat because of Sinhalese support. Practically in every ministerial cabinet Muslims were represented. Educationally, Government Muslim Schools were opened in all provinces which operated on a religiously determined school calendar different from the national school calendar. These schools were staffed by Muslim teachers most of whom were trained in exclusive Muslim Teachers Training Colleges. These schools are supervised by Muslim Inspectors and administered by a Muslim Director of Education. Culturally, Islamic holy days were declared public holidays; Muslims were allocated exclusive hours to broadcast Islamic programs over Radio Ceylon; Muslim public servants were allowed to take extended lunch-breaks on Fridays to attend Jumm’a prayers; a Wakf Board was established to manage all the mosques in the island; and Kazi religious courts were created for Muslims to deal with Muslim marriage and divorce issues on the basis of shariah laws. Economically also, at least until a Socialist Government came to power in 1970, the open economy allowed Muslim businessmen to thrive without much
restraint (Ali, 1986, O’Sullivan, 1997). The fact that all this were achieved by Muslims without a political party of their own and that it was the ethnic rivalry between the Sinhalese and Tamils that made these achievements easier to get were factors that the current Muslim leadership fails to understand and acknowledge.

This strategy of aligning with the ruling governments to harvest transient benefits did not change even after forming in 1985 the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), an ethnic Muslim political party “pledged to follow the Quran and the Sunnah” (Imtiyaz, 2012). Its founder, M.H. M. Ashraff, like his predecessors, Razik in 1950s and Badiuddin Mahmud in 1960s and 1970s continued to play the hackneyed game of identity politics, perhaps more openly and aggressively than before. Ashraff, under the Chandrika Kumaratunga Government and Presidency became the Minister of Ports Development and Reconstruction. Like the Ministry of Education under Mahmud which “became at once a political base and a fountain of patronage” (de Silva, 1981, p. 552) Ashraff’s ministry also functioned as a virtual employment exchange at least for the Muslims of the South-East. One of his outstanding achievements was the establishment of the South-Eastern University of Sri Lanka in Oluvil, a predominantly Muslim area, in 1995. Once again, it was the angry LTTE reaction to Muslim alliance with the government that manifested through student harassment of Muslim undergraduates in the universities of Jaffna and Batticaloa that enabled Ashraff to plead for and get cabinet approval to establish the South-Eastern University.

The Tamil anger against the Muslim-Sinhalese political alliance exploded into open and brutal violence against the Muslims when the LTTE took control of Sri Lankan Tamil’s political destiny. While on the one hand the concentration of almost one-third of the Muslim population in the north and east of the island, who identified themselves as Muslims and not Tamils, hollowed LTTE’s claim of a contiguous Tamil territory, the support of these Muslims to the Sinhalese governments on the other portrayed them as a fifth column and betrayers to the cause of Tamil Eelam. Consequently, the LTTE unleashed some of its worst attacks on Muslims and expelled the entire Muslim population from Jaffna and Mannar districts in 1990 (Imtiyaz, 2005). It is reasonable to surmise that had the LTTE remained undefeated and in control of the North and in parts of the
East, Muslims would have continued to win the support and sympathy of the Sinhalese majority governments. The military defeat of the LTTE in 2008 however, and the total annihilation of its leadership has unfortunately deprived Muslim politicians of an important bargaining chip. The past strategy of aligning with the Sinhalese governments to gain benefits at the expense of Tamils now seems to have passed its use by date.

**Deteriorating Sinhalese Muslim Relations**

Even during the honeymoon period Muslim leaders, because of their political obsequiousness to the governments in power, could not prevent injustices suffered by sections of their own community as a result of policies implemented by governments they supported. For instance, when the Ampara Sugarcane Project was implemented in the Eastern Province in the 1960s Muslim farmers lost without compensation thousands of acres of paddy lands that were traditionally owned and cultivated by them when those lands were acquired by the government. Later, in the 1980s, the Dighawapi Buddhist Sacred Area Project swallowed more Muslim lands again without adequate compensation. The International Crisis Group in its Asia Report No. 134 of May 2007 has recorded more recent complaints from Muslims in the East about Sinhalese land encroachment in Muslim areas. When the Tamils agitated in the sixties and seventies against Sinhalese colonization of Tamil areas Muslim leaders were caught in a catch-22 situation and remained silent. It is sad that the Muslim dimension of Sinhalization escaped even the attention of The Social Architects’ “Salt on Old Wounds: The Systematic Sinhalization of Sri Lanka’s North, East and Hill Country” (1912).

Under the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-Left United Front Coalition Government of Srimavo Bandaranaike the establishment of the State Trading Corporation, the State Gem Corporation, Cooperative Wholesale Establishment, and the enactment of the Paddy Lands Bill, all disproportionately and adversely affected Muslim businessmen and land owners. A number of Muslim business premises and residences were raided by the police and tax officials for alleged tax avoidance and financial misdemeanours. “While Muslims were displaced from their traditional niches, state legislation and nationalisation policies provided opportunities for Sinhalese to enter trade and commerce, two areas in which they had
previously had little involvement” (O’Sullivan, 1997). Even Badiuddin Mahmud, a founder member of the SLFP, the leader of the Islamic Socialist Front (ISF), and the Minister of Education in the coalition government, was powerless to stop any of the economic injustices. Perhaps as a response to these losses Mahmud quite brazenly used his influence with the Prime Minister and the power of his ministry to provide employment to all educated Muslim youth. This led to a backlash from Sinhalese chauvinists. By 1973 anti-Muslim sentiment was kindled among the Sinhalese which culminated in sporadic clashes between the two communities in various parts of the island, and the worst incident happened in 1976 in Puttalam, an ancient Muslim town in the North-West of the island, in which 271 Muslim families lost their homes, 44 shops were looted and burnt and 18 Muslims were shot inside a mosque by the police. Seven of those shot were fatally wounded (A.S.M. Anas et al, 2008, p.55).

When the United National Party (UNP) under J.R. Jayawardena captured power in 1977 its first task was to introduce a new constitution which did away with the Westminster model of parliamentary government and introduced a hybrid presidential system borrowed from the French and American models. One of the objectives of this constitution was to deprive the influence of minorities especially that of the Muslims in deciding the winners in general elections. A.J. Wilson, a prominent political scientist, reckoned that in about 20 to 22 percent of the electorates under the Westminster model Muslim votes would decide the winner if the contest between candidates was to be close (A.J. Wilson, 1975, p.175). “The landslide victory of the U.N.P and the constitutional changes that followed should therefore be viewed as steps intended to free the U.N.P and even the S.L.F.P in future from any dependence on minority support” (Ali, 1986). It was the new constitution with its scheme of proportional representation that paved the way for some Muslims to form a political party of their own, the SLMC.

In the general elections of 1993 when the SLFP won with a slender majority SLMC’s support became crucial to form a government. The election results demonstrated clearly the failure of Jayewardena’s objective of marginalising Muslim influence. The leader of the SLMC, Ashraff, publicly trumpeted, with an element of truth, that it was he and his party that was responsible for the
formation of the Chandrika Kumaratunga Government. This flamboyant braggadocio inflamed anti-Muslim feelings among the Sinhalese, which was further aggravated in 1999 when Ahraff challenged and engaged in a television debate with Gangodawila Somarama Thera, who considered the Muslims a threat to Sri Lanka. Although the debate was a “setback for the popular Buddhist monk” (Dewasiri, 2012) it deepened the bitterness of some sections of Buddhists towards Muslims. In 2001, a major clash broke out in Mawanella, a town along the Colombo-Kandy Road, which spread to its suburban villages causing considerable losses to Muslim lives and property. At least one mosque was incinerated in this episode (Anas et al., 2008). All in all, between the 1970s and until 2002, nearly 30 violent Muslim–Sinhalese clashes have been recorded and in a number of them Buddhist monks had played a leading role (M. S. M. Anas et al., 2008). Sporadic violence continued to occur thereafter and the anti-Muslim rally in Dambulla in April 2012, which was “meticulously planned” (Hussain, 2012) and operated by radical monks who demanded the closure of a mosque in that town, was one of the more recent of such incidents.

The current United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) regime which actually commenced in 2005 with the victory of Mahinda Rajapakse as the new President of the country for a six year term and continuing until now after his re-election in 2010, has accommodated a number of ultra-Buddhist elements in a grand coalition, which includes the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or the National Freedom Front established by Buddhist monks in 2004. From the Vidyalankara Privena Declaration in 1946 to the formation of JHU in 2004 political Buddhism has had a robust growth with the support of the ruling governments. Along with its growth militant Buddhism has also dovetailed spitting venom against the Muslims and other minorities. A mood of triumphalism in the wake of the 2009 victory over the LTTE has hardened the militants’ antipathy towards all minorities in the country. Like the JVP before, the JHU now is also engaged in protracted campaign against Muslim business interests. The call to boycott Muslim shops by Sinhalese consumers and urging the Sinhalese not to sell land or property to Muslims is a constant theme in this campaign. The emergence of “several new middle class social layers” amongst the Buddhists and an upsurge of “extreme Buddhist nationalism”, as Dewasiri
maintains, have combined to jeopardise Sinhalese-Muslim relations in the 21st century Sri Lanka (Dewasiri, 2012).

**Islamic Orthodoxy: Growth and Implications**

Victor C. de Munk’s provocative statement that “most Sri Lankan Muslims do not perceive themselves as full citizens of the Sri Lankan nation as it is presently formulated” (de Munk, 1998) requires serious consideration in the context of the current Sinhalese-Buddhist-Muslim tensions. Obeyasekere’s equation, “Sri Lanka=Sinhala=Buddhism”, which Munk quotes, virtually excludes all ethnic or religious minorities from full citizenship and equal status. The 1972 Republican constitution introduced by the SLFP-Left Coalition not only removed the safeguards accorded to minorities under Section (29) 2 of the 1946 Soulbury Constitution but also elevated Buddhism to special status within the polity. With ‘Sinhalese Only’ as the official language and Buddhism as religion with special status, the Tamils saw the writings on the wall that their language and culture being demoted constitutionally. They took up the fight to redress this imbalance, which ultimately led them to demand a separate state, culminating in a civil war that ended in military defeat. The Muslim community on the other hand, as observed earlier, did not have anything to do with the Tamil struggle and continued to align themselves with the Sinhalese majority. One of the reasons for this nonchalance, apart from politics of pragmatism, was the switch from the ‘racial’ Moor identity to the religious Muslim identity after the 1970s. This new identity which was chosen as a convenient tool to demonstrate Muslim neutrality in the raging Sinhalese-Tamil armed confrontation promoted the growth of religious consciousness within the community and made *umma Islamiyya* or Islamic community and not the nation of Sri Lanka the primary entity of allegiance. The periodic switch of identity by the Muslim elite from Moor to Ceylon Moor and to Muslim reinforces Ismail’s argument that identities are “fluid, transient, always in flux, never permanent; and ... they alter ... precisely because they are constructs” (Ismail Q 1995, italics in the original). However, unlike his claim that the switch is always made in the interest of the elite, the one from Ceylon Moor to Muslim was made at the grass root level rather than at the elite level owing to the evangelical endeavour of Muslim missionary movements as will be shown below.
The concept of umma Islamiyya refers to the collectivity of believers in Islam of all nations who consider the Islamic shariah as the guiding principle and philosophy of any political entity. This universal religious community which exists more in the believers’ imagination than in reality is found spread within three regions as delineated by the classical Muslim jurists: those who live in dharul Islam (the abode of peace) where Muslim rule prevails; those who live trapped in dharul harb (the abode of war) where Muslims dwell under oppressive non-Muslim rule like in 16th century Spain under Christian monarchs; and those who live in dharul sulh (the abode of truce) where Muslims live in peace with freedom to practice their religion while owing civic allegiance to the country in which they live. The history of Islam and Buddhist tolerance of Muslims in Sri Lanka unequivocally places the Muslim community in the last category. Until the last quarter of the of the 20th century Buddhist-Muslim relations rarely faced any tension on religious grounds, even though it was a Buddhist religious procession that provided the immediate trigger for the 1915 riots; but that is now a distant memory. However, certain developments in the last three or four decades as pointed out earlier have created once again an environment of tension between the two communities. A fresh wave of ultra-Islamic orthodoxy appears to be in clash with political Buddhism and its minority militant offshoot. Before exploring Munk’s contention further some aspects of this orthodoxy and its growth in Sri Lanka need addressing.

The open economy of the 1980s in Sri Lanka ushered in at a time when a new wave of Islamic awakening was sweeping across the Muslim Middle East. The emergence of the Organization of the Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) as price setter of petroleum, which flooded the coffers of the OAPEC (Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) nations with countless amount of petro-dollars; the success of the Iranian “Islamicized” (Dabashi H, 2012: 40) revolution in 1979 which, although was a shia minority phenomenon, yet, sent a strong message to the sunni majority that worldwide Islamic rule was not far away; and, the successful participation of Al-Qaida and the Mujahideen in the American led war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan: all these developments culminated in an umma-wide Islamic euphoria that the world had never witnessed before. Islam arrived at the centre stage of world politics and dialogue, and the Muslims believed that Islam is the final solution
to a world in turmoil. The economic affluence of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states on the one hand and the ascendancy of political Islam on the other began to impact Muslim minorities the world over, both materially as well as spiritually. Sri Lanka was no exception to this phenomenon.

On the material side, employment opportunities that opened up in the Middle East attracted hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans - Muslims and non-Muslims, males and females, and skilled and unskilled – in search of lucrative jobs with better pay. One category of such jobs was housemaids. While the remittances of these expatriates were a handy source of income to their families in Sri Lanka and added to the stock of foreign exchange of a cash-strapped government (in 1997 for instance the total remittances amounted to $1 billion which outweighed the trade deficit of $0.7 billion), evidence of oppressive working conditions and mistreatment of housemaids by Arab landlords led to open criticism by Buddhist nationalists. Scholars like Sarachchandra, as pointed out earlier, condemned the government policy of exporting labour, especially Sinhalese housemaids, to Muslim Middle East. On this issue however, Sarachchandra was only echoing a criticism levelled already in the fifties by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the founding father of the SLFP, at affluent local Muslims employing in their homes Sinhalese women as housemaids (Lebbe, 1980).

Another material benefit enjoyed especially by the Muslims had a spiritual side to it. The local Muslim community became a favoured beneficiary of Arab charity from the 1980s. While Sri Lankan products like tea and precious stones found a ready market in Muslim Middle East, which increased the country’s national income (close to 50 percent of Sri Lankan tea goes even now to Muslim countries), Arab public and private charity flowed back into the Muslim community in the form of financial assistance to build mosques, madrasas, and other Muslim religious and cultural institutions. Even local Muslims employed in the Middle East donated generously to those projects. Muslims, in general, have a penchant towards building mosques and the imams never stopped stressing in their sermons the heavenly reward waiting for those who build a ‘House for Allah’ in this world. As a result of external assistance and internal collections new mosques were built and old ones were renovated and enlarged, and according to the Sri Lankan Wakf Board website there are at
least 1,816 mosques of varying sizes in the country. The actual number should be more than that because not all mosques are registered with the Wakf Board. In recent years however, a number of these mosques and madrasas have become a source of Buddhist-Muslim tension.

Unlike the Buddhist vihares, Christian churches and Hindu temples, Muslim mosques have to be internally spacious to accommodate hundreds of worshippers every day. Also, unlike in other religions, praying five times a day is obligatory to all Muslims. Praying in congregation, preferably in a mosque led by an imam, is taught to be more meritorious than praying in isolation at one’s home or elsewhere. On Friday noon every week, for thirty nights during the fasting month of Ramadhan, and in the mornings of the two festival days, the congregation of worshippers would swell to thousands. In the early days of Islam the mosque operated not only as a place of worship but also as a centre of learning and communal assemblies. It continues to perform these functions even now. This means the mosque premise is an intensely utilised spot and is never left un-attended. The Prophet of Islam innovated a unique way of reminding Muslims about prayer times, by vocally calling them through a specific recitation in Arabic, the adhan. This recitation continues unaltered to this day and could be heard at least five times a day wherever Muslims live. Tradition has made it meritorious for Muslims to live close to a mosque so that they could hear the voice of adhan. However, in plural societies like Sri Lanka where people of different faiths and of philosophical persuasion live as neighbours, and with increased urbanization and noise pollution, this voice is not always audible unless a loudspeaker is used. It is the use of this piece of technology especially for the pre-dawn prayer that has caused problem. That particular adhan disturbed everyone’s sleep. Some aggressive Buddhists reacted to this disturbance in a tit-for-tat manner by playing over loudspeakers, even before the Muslim pre-dawn prayer time, taped versions of Buddhist chanting. The issue over this cacophony of competing religious noises went before the Supreme Court which delivered its verdict on 9 November 2007 disallowing the use of loudspeakers that caused “annoyance, disturbance, and harm” to other parties (CIMOGG, 2007).

Construction of mosques without approval from the state or its local governing authorities and without conforming to the national architectural environment
of the country is a burning issue in most Western countries. Behind this issue is the fundamental fear of several European countries about Muslim “political will to take power” and establish Shariah law (New York Times, 2009). The controversy over the minarets in Switzerland is well known and even in Australia the Department of Town Planning is quite scrupulous in approving applications for building mosques. In Sri Lanka the Muslims never threatened to take control of political power nor are they craving for the implementation of Shariah law on a national scale. However, to the Sinhala-Buddhist political monks and their followers, who view Sri Lanka as the land of dhammadipa or the land of the righteous, the mosques, churches, and even Hindu temples have become icons of the unrighteous. It is this religiously manufactured fear that has led to protests against mosques and madrasas.

The Muslim code of dress has also become controversial in recent decades. The traditional sarong, shirt, jacket, and Fez cap for males, and sari, blouse, and mukkudu (the top piece of the sari thrown over the head) for females, are gradually being replaced with a mixture of north-Indian or Pakistani and Arabian attire for both men and women. The long black gown with a black niqab or veil that covers the face with a small opening for the eyes is entirely a recent introduction into the sartorial designs of Muslim women in Sri Lanka. I have already dealt with the historical genesis and religious aspects of burqa and niqab in another context (Ali, 2010a).

The mushrooming of mosques and madrasas, the call for prayer over loudspeakers, and the changing Muslim attire are all related to a rising brand of Islamic orthodoxy after the 1970s. There are two Islamic movements in Sri Lanka that have promoted this orthodoxy. One is the Tabligh Jamaat (TJ) whose origins go back to pre-independence India. It is a missionary movement whose chief objective is Islamization of Muslims rather than converting non-Muslims to Islam (Ali, A. 2006). Indian missionaries of TJ frequented Sri Lanka from the 1950s and today the number of its local foot-soldiers has grown to hundreds of thousands. TJ is a non-aggressive and moderate religious movement that shuns any political involvement or affiliation. In fact, it preaches minimum attachment to the affairs of this world and maximum devotion to matters of the Hereafter. Its disinterestedness in more mundane and national issues is a concern to all governments. As Ziauddin Sardar, a
prolific writer on Muslim affairs, found out from his experience with TJ, they “neither offered nor considered they had to do anything particular about rampant injustice, the horrors of suffering and neglect that formed the circumstances and deformed so many lives in country after country, the Muslim world especially” (Sardar Z, 2004, p. 12).

The second movement, Wahhabi or Wahhabism, is of a more recent origin arriving from Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism takes its name from its founder Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab (1703-1792) and is aggressively orthodox in its approach to the tenets of Islam. It does not tolerate any deviation from its strict and literal interpretation of the Quran and the *sunnah* (sayings and practices of the Prophet), and is anti-*shia*, anti-*sufi*, and anti-other religions. Wahhabism is the official ideology of Saudi Arabia and the spread of Wahhabism is part of the program in Saudi Arabia’s contest for worldwide Islamic leadership. The mosques, *madrasas* and cultural associations that receive financial assistance from the Saudi Government invariably become Wahhabi agents of religious change. Wahhabism in recent decades has become a social disequilibrator in several Muslim and non-Muslim countries. In Sri Lanka, Wahhabi-induced religious factionalism among Muslims has even led to death and destruction, as happened in 2006 in Kattankudy, an urban Muslim settlement in the Eastern Province (Ali, A. 2009).

To both, TJ and Wahbabism, the *umma Islamiyya* is the primary unit of affiliation and allegiance, and therefore, owing an equivalent allegiance to a politically constructed nation state unless that state is a Muslim one weakens the strength of *umma Islamiyya*. If so, what are the rights and obligations of Muslims in a non-Muslim nation state? The *shariah* has no direct answer to this question, because the entire corpus of the *shariah* was designed and compiled at a time when Muslims were in political power. It spells out the details of how a Muslim state should treat non-Muslims living in its midst but does not tell how Muslims should live in a non-Muslim state. *Fiqh al-aqalliyat al-muslima* (jurisprudence of Muslim minorities) pioneered by scholars like Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi, 2001) is currently in its nascent stage and yet to provide a blueprint in these matters to Muslim minorities living all over the world.
In many parts of the world where Muslims live as minorities they live in “parallel societies” as argued by Tibi (2008). The Muslim preference to build parallel societies is perhaps the legacy of the Convivencia model that prevailed in Muslim Spain where each ethnic or religious community was allowed to live in virtual exclusion governed by its own religious laws (Ali 2010b). In Sri Lanka also this exclusivist trend is noticeable. Imtiyaz’s contention that Islamic fundamentalism in Sri Lanka is a “by-product of state’s cultural and socio-economic concessions in the 70s and 80s to the Muslim elites to win Muslim support” and “provided a solid platform for the recent growth of Islamic exclusivism” provides a convenient platform (Imtiyaz ARM, op.cit.) to discuss this new development and Munk’s statement cited above. Even if Obeyesekere’s equation be reformulated to read as Sri Lanka = Ethnic + Religious Pluralism, the question arises as to what is the nature and extent of Muslims’ commitment to the country in which they live? Are they Muslims in Sri Lanka or of Sri Lanka? To put it differently, are they Muslim Sri Lankans or Sri Lankan Muslims? The difference between the two questions in each set is not semantic or superficial but substantive and of far reaching implication. To the Muslim fundamentalists, who look to umma Islamiyya as the primary unit of allegiance they are Muslims in and not of Sri Lanka. In their perception, the transient attachment to this world and relentless yearning towards the Hereafter makes citizenship an ambivalent concept to say the least. However, it should be stressed that commitment to umma Islamiyya does not imply any extraterritorial allegiance. It simply means that the fundamentalists are not typically interested in national political and other mundane issues. Andrew March’s (2009) search for overlapping consensus between liberal citizenship and Islamic shariah is a fascinating study that can provides a compromise solution to this crucial debate.

For the present purpose, an ideologically constructed claim by the militant Buddhists that Sri Lanka belongs solely to the Sinhalese-Buddhists and that the others could live only at the behest of the Sinhalese and as second grade citizens, is directly at loggerhead with the Muslim fundamentalist perception that Muslims in Sri Lanka are a part of a universal umma whose rights and obligations are religiously determined and lie outside the dictates of a politically constructed Buddhist entity. While the militant Buddhists are keen in Buddhisizing Sri Lanka, as noted recently by the Director of the Catholic
Diocese of Jaffna (2012), the Muslim fundamentalists are keen in Islamizing the Muslims with *umma-Islamiyya* consciousness. According to Senewiratne, a Sinhalese human rights activist, the issue of Buddhization of the “multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural, multilingual Sri Lanka ... is not an opinion to be debated, but a fact to be faced” (2012, p. 7). Obviously, when the citizenship rights of minorities are devalued because of the majority’s aggrandizing political behaviour, minorities are left with no alternative but to seek refuge in other forms of social formations. Thus, the Muslims’ identity with *umma-Islamiyya* cannot be treated entirely as a religious choice without considering its potential political implication.

Be that as it may, this fundamental contradiction between the goals of political Buddhism and Islamic fundamentalism is currently being exploited by an open-economy-generated Sinhalese-Buddhist bourgeoisie to gain economic mileage over the Muslim businessmen; and it is this toxic mix that lies at the heart of recent Sinhalese-Muslim disturbances. An open economy always creates inequities if not regulated; but that regulation must be rational in objective and neutral in implementation. The current political regime in Sri Lanka with its alliance with JHU and ultra-nationalists does not seem to have either the capacity or willingness to tackle this issue.

With the Tamil ethnic problem still remaining unresolved, more than three years after the end of the civil war, opening a second front to fight the Muslim community will only impact the country’s international image even more negatively. When the Dambulla mosque incident took place in April 2012 the Muslims of Tamil Nadu went on a protest march to express their anger, and several foreign Muslim diplomats in Colombo also raised their concern with the government. Sri Lanka’s dependence on the Arab market for tea exports and for employment opportunities for more than one million of its citizens is a compelling reason why the government should be sensitive to anti-Muslim cries at home. Even in the United Nations Sri Lanka carries considerable support from Muslim countries as demonstrated recently over the March 2012 resolution on war crimes. Similarly, the fifty-six member Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is an international block of Muslim nations whose opinion on Muslim issues carries considerable weight internationally. The
umma Islamiyya consciousness of the Sri Lankan Muslims, in spite of its shortcomings, has obvious geo-political implications.

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