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Waves of Muslim-phobia in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The end of the civil war (1983-2009) in Sri Lanka has disappointingly failed to deliver any peace dividend. Instead, an era of triumphalism with a mood of schadenfreude entered the ruling quarters bringing in even more humiliation and uncertainties to ethnic minorities. The Muslim community has become the latest victim of this triumphalism. The ultra-nationalist Bodhu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), a Buddhist organization led by an obstreperous firebrand monk Galagodaththe Gnanasara is on a nationwide rampage spreading anti-Muslim venom to cause material and psychological harm to the Muslim community. In the ultimate analysis this anti-Muslim rage on top of an anti-Tamil Buddhist nationalism is heading towards jeopardising the pluralist character of Sri Lanka’s democracy. Yet, the current anti-Muslim episode is only the latest of its kind. There had been three previous waves of such trend, the first during the British colonial regime, which culminated in the 1915 racial riots, the second during the so called socialist era of Prime Minister Srimavo Bandaranaike, climaxing in the 1976 Puttalam riots, and the third after the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom. In the current fourth wave the Alutgama riots of 2014 was yet the most destructive. In all four waves Muslims have been at the receiving end of the onslaught. Will they continue to remain so? What are their options?

Introduction

Enterprising minorities in most plural societies invariably become the target of anger and envy from the majority community whenever those societies’ economy and polity come under internal and external pressures. Recent experiences of Indians in Burma, Fiji and Africa, Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia are few of many examples of this phenomenon. In the history of modern Sri Lanka the Muslim minority has also borne the brunt of this envy and anger in times of crisis as will be shown in the following account. This Muslim community consisting of two different ethnic groups the Moors and Malays, with roughly 1,870,000 of the first and 40,000 of the second is the second largest minority next to the Tamils, in a total population of 20,263,000 according to the 2011 census. While the Moors and Malays account for 9.4 per cent of the population ethnically, in terms of religion however, Islam’s ratio has edged to 9.7 per cent provoking a malicious campaign by ultranationalist Buddhists that the country, in spite of remaining 70 per cent Buddhist in 2011, will be Islamized in the not too distant future. Throughout the history of the
island Muslims have been known for their piety, economic dynamism, and resourcefulness; but in times of national economic hardship and political difficulties all these elements have come under extreme pressure. What follows illustrates this commonality in four different waves of anti-Muslim rage in three different periods.

The First wave c.1880-1915

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of religious and cultural awakening in Sri Lanka. Centuries of colonial rule by three different Christian powers, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, had deprived Buddhism and Hinduism, the two predominant religions of the country, of their pre-colonial primacy. Western missionaries had converted over the past four centuries hundreds of thousands of Buddhists and Hindus to Christianity of various denominations. Islam, although was willingly accommodated into the local cultural mosaic by the pre-colonial Buddhist and Hindu monarchs lost its privileges however under the Portuguese and Dutch rules before being allowed to thrive under the British. All three religions went through a period of revivalism in the latter half of the 19th century.

Of the three revivalist movements it was Buddhist revivalism that metamorphosed into a nationalist movement with political undertones. Towards the end of the century the Buddhist revivalist movement had evolved into an anti-colonial, anti-British and patriotic movement which galvanized its popular support by attacking the inequities engendered by colonial capitalism. It was in this economic dimension of the nationalist campaign the Muslim community and its commercial exploits received the main focus of attention. It was also the leaders of this movement particularly the Buddhist convert Anagarika Dharmapala, whose original Christian name was David Hewawitharana Dharmapala, first used the term Sinhala Buddhist in a racial-religious sense. The political ideology that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese Buddhist nation, which preoccupies the mindset of present day ultranationalists like the Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) has its origins in the 19th century Buddhist revivalism.

In the 19th century economy Muslim businessmen were one of the beneficiaries of colonial capitalism. The plantation economy, the pre-eminence
of Colombo as the administrative and commercial capital, and the opening of
the interior by a network of roads and railways created multiple opportunities
for the development of a domestic trading and services sector. Muslim
businessmen who hitherto were a scattered group of peddlers and *tavalam* or
bullock-driven caravan traders took advantage of this opening and became a
class of settled boutique keepers in villages and towns. For example in 1885
outside Colombo, Kandy and Galle, there were 27 Muslim shops in Batticaloa,
8 in Trincomalee, 7 each in Dickoya and Madulsima, 4 each in Badulla, Jaffna,
Maskeliya, Nawalapitiya, Pussellawa and Rakwana, 3 each in Gampola and
Ratnapura, 2 each in Dimbulla, Haldumulla, Nuwara Eliya, and Passara and one
each in Aranayake, Lindula, Nanu Oya, Tellicoultry, Haputale, Kotmale, Matale,
Maturata, Negombo, Puttalam, Ragala and Yantiyantota⁴. According to the
1911 *Ceylon Census Report*, 68,500 Sinhalese, 32,200 Tamils and 30,700
Muslims earned their living through trade. Ali Foad Toulba, a traveller from
Egypt observed in 1926: “Indeed, it did impress me no little in my motor trip
across Ceylon, to notice that even in the remotest and the most out-of-the-
way villages, far from the beaten track, there, as sure as ever, was the local
Tamby, and his very ubiquitousness reminded me most strikingly of the equally
enterprising and pushful Greek of my own country”⁵.

With the growth of towns and consequent urbanization Muslim businessmen
and their retail establishments along with their mosques inevitably became the
essential markers of the urban milieu. By the end of the 19th century there
were twenty-eight towns in the island with a total urban population of
400,000⁶, and in 1911 almost one quarter of the Muslim population lived in the
Municipal and urban areas. Within this urban Muslim population however was
the entry of a new subgroup categorised as Coast Moors or Indian Moors by
the colonial officialdom.

The Indian Moors who arrived in Sri Lanka were part of a general exodus of
Muslim businessmen from the Trinevelly District of former Madras who lost
their trading monopoly in the face of competition from Vellalans and
Ilavaaniyans⁷. For example, a good number of Indian Muslims who set up
businesses in Kandy were from Melappalayam, a division of Trinevelly⁸. In fact
the owners of the then leading firm Abram Saibo & Co. of Kandy with branches
in Gampola, Dimbulla, Lindula and Trillicoultry had a virtual monopoly over
wholesale and retail business in those towns. But there were other Tamil speaking Muslims too from places like Kayalpatnam, Keelakkarai, Devipatnam, Ammapatnam, and so on from South India who were attracted by the rising economic opportunities of a nascent capitalist economy. The total number of Indian Moors accounted for 33,000 in the 1911 census and their businesses spread practically into every town and village in the country. Unlike the indigenous Moor whose relationship with the Sinhalese population was of the Chinese *guanxi* type of long term and beyond pecuniary, the Indian Moor’s contact with the Sinhalese was essentially transitory, economic and profit oriented.

The Indian Moor was not the only new entrant to local trading. There was also the Low country Sinhalese, especially the Karavas who also penetrated into the towns and interior villages opening up boutiques to sell groceries and other miscellaneous items in competition with the Moors. “It is the Moormen … and the low-country Sinhalese man, especially the enterprising Galle man”, wrote J.P. Lewis, the Government Agent of Central Province in 1909, “who have all the petty trade of the Kandyan villages in their hands. Every coming year sees the low-country man advancing along the Kandyan roads, building boutiques as he comes, ousting the Kandyan and spreading low-country fashions as to dress and speech”\(^9\). Governor Sir Robert Chalmers in a dispatch to Andrew Bonar Law, the Secretary of State for Colonies captured the scenario quite succinctly: “The Mohammedan traders, who come from South-India and return thither when they have money by retail trading, 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. Moreover … the war has had its effect in raising prices. And, in a peasant country where retail prices are expressed in cents and half-cents … even a slight rise in customary prices is both felt and resented by the customer. With the pre-existing feeling towards Mohammedan traders, and with the recent resentment against rising prices, the Sinhalese trader from the low-country had opportunities for ousting his established trade rivals, and is known to have formed, in certain areas, Buddhist traders’ associations for the furtherance of exclusive interests”\(^10\).
Inflation, commercial rivalry, and economic exploitation naturally created an environment of resentment and anger between the intruders and the indigenous providing a convenient platform to the Buddhist nationalist agitators. However, instead of attacking the colonial regime and the economic structure that led to this explosive situation to start with the nationalists turned on the Muslim community as their immediate target. It is a strange irony in Sri Lanka’s modern history that Dharmapala, the celebrated nationalist hero and who spearheaded this attack on Muslims, had no anti-imperialist sentiments at that time and unashamedly expressed his total subservience to the British Throne. “True that I criticise in my articles the officials”, he said, “but my loyalty to the British Throne is as solid as a rock and I have invariably expressed sentiments of loyalty to the King”\(^\text{11}\). Ratnaweera, the editor of the *Aryan*, even described the British an Aryan nation\(^\text{12}\).

Thus the first anti-Muslim wave emerged in an environment of Buddhist cultural revival, emerging nationalism and economic inequities. Even though it was the Indian Moors who epitomised in the view of nationalists the ugly face of colonial capitalism the indigenous Muslims’ support to their Indian brethren, in the name of religious and racial identity, dragged the local Moors also into the fray. The *Muslim Guardian* of 14 October 1904, a Tamil bi-weekly edited by I.L.M. Abdul Azeez wrote in its editorial: “The South-Coast Moors who are British subjects have a right to come and earn a living in Ceylon, a British country... The South-Coast Moors and Ceylon Moors are related by religion and to an extent by race... It is the duty of the Ceylon moors to be always helpful towards their brothers, who have come here to trade. Therefore the Ceylon Moors should do all they can in order to stop the harassment the Sinhalese have intended to cause them.”

Dharmapala in his speeches and writings did not always differentiate between the indigenous and Indian Moors. “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”\(^\text{13}\) he wrote. “There will always be bad blood between the Moors and the Sinhalese”\(^\text{14}\) he added further. The nationalists called for an economic boycott of Muslim shops by their Sinhalese patrons.
Piyadasa Sirisena, a Buddhist nationalist wrote in the *Sinhala Jatiya* of 9 March 1915, a Sinhalese journal edited by him, that:

“A good many of the Moors have taken into their hands various branches of trade in Ceylon, and they have become strong in cash. Their trade is with the Sinhalese. Therefore their monied power is one derived from the Sinhalese himself. This monied power of the Moor being (thus) not one acquired from some other source, such as planting, but being derived entirely from trade, it can be said that the life of the Moor is in the hands of the Sinhalese. But having become wealthy with our own money, and making the living from ourselves (the Moor) makes our own money a weapon with which to give knocks on our heads. Therefore the time has come for taking speedy measures to stop this sort of thing. We should so act to bring home the benefits of the moor derives from the Sinhalese. The only way for it is to come to a firm, determination, since there are Sinhalese shops and boutiques in all towns, villages, and townlets in Ceylon, not to buy an article worth even a cent from ... the (Moor) ... Gentlemen engaged in trade in Galle, Matale, Kurunegala, Ambalangoda, Alutgama, etc., where Sinhalese traders are plentiful, should handbills printed showing from cogent reasons the wrongfulness of buying from Moors, and they should distribute those handbills one each to all men and women on the road as well as coming to their boutiques. If action is taken on these lines, not only will the trade, unity, and mutual love of the Sinhalese grow, but a good lesson can be taught to the Moor.”

Since that time boycotting Muslim businesses has become, as will be shown later, a conspicuous weapon in the armoury of anti-Muslim Sinhala-Buddhist campaigners. By 1915 however, the inflammatory speeches and writings by Buddhist nationalists, which began in the 1880s, had created such a mass hysteria that it waited for a trigger to explode into open violence, and that trigger came on 29th May 1915 following the Buddhist Vesak festival when a crowd of Buddhists attacked the mosque at Castle Hill Street in Kandy, looted a number of Muslim shops in the town and caused considerable damage to Muslim property. This incident itself was provoked by a nagging religious issue relating to beating drums and playing music in traditional Buddhist processions while passing in front of mosques. This was a frequent source of friction between the two communities as occurred in 1902 in Galle and in 1907 and 1912 in Gampola. Everything culminated in the 1915 racial riots which occurred in 116 different centres in five of the island’s nine provinces lasting nine days. As a consequence, 25 Muslims were murdered, 189 were wounded, at least four Muslim women were raped, 4,075 Muslim shops were looted, 350 houses and 17 mosques were set ablaze and another 50 mosques suffered structural damages. In monetary terms the losses were calculated at more than 5.5 million rupees, a considerable sum at that time.
Second Wave (1970s)

The 1915 ethnic convulsion left no permanent marks on Buddhist–Muslim relations. If there was any lesson that the Muslims learnt from that episode it was the realisation that the future survival and prosperity of the community were interlocked with integrating even more tightly with the Sinhalese. This lesson was openly displayed in the political behaviour of Muslim leaders in the post-independent Sri Lankan democracy. Muslim leadership accurately understood the strategic strength of their community in political terms even if it was the second minority. Quite sagaciously and with great pragmatism Muslim leaders unlike the Tamils disavowed any idea of forming their own ethnic-based or religious-based political party and decided to join any national party that was prepared to support Muslim candidates and Muslim interests. As Sri Lanka quickly descended in the 1960s and 1970s into a protracted and bitter ethno-nationalist battle ground fought between the Sinhalese and Tamils the importance of Muslim support to governments in power reinforced the political wisdom of Muslim leaders. As a result in every legislature and in every cabinet since 1947 Muslims gained representation always proportionate to their population strength and at times even more than proportionate16.

On the economic front the market friendly policies of the United National Party (UNP) Governments from 1947 to 1956, 1965 to 1970 and 1977 to 1994 were more favourable to Muslim economic interests than the market restrictive policies of the Bandaranaike regimes in the late fifties, early sixties and most part of the seventies. Not surprisingly therefore the Muslim community, which is historically known for its expertise in trade and trade related activities, was more in supportive of the UNP regimes than those of the Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP) of Bandaranaikes. It was during the 1970-77 period of the SLFP-led coalition of the United Front Government (UFG), which included the Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP) of the Moscow Wing, that Sri Lanka witnessed a second wave of anti-Muslim hysteria. It arose from two fronts, one economic and other educational.

A popular perception until the 1970s that the Muslims of Sri Lanka, as O’Sullivan quotes, were “only known for two things: for eating biriyani and voting UNP”17 constrained some Sinhalese nationalists and politicians of the left to vilify the Muslim community as one of parasites who thrived at the
expense of the sweat and toil of others\textsuperscript{18}. Taking that mindset as the political backdrop one needs to look at the deficit-reducing budgetary measures, the structural economic reforms and the import substitution strategies of the United Front Government\textsuperscript{19} to understand the impact they had on the Muslim community. Although these measures and reforms were intended to create a socialist economy and society yet they carried an anti-Muslim bias in implementation. For example, the establishment in 1972 of the Gem Corporation and the Sri Lanka State Trading Corporation hit the Muslim businessmen harder because they took away a significant stake the Muslims held hitherto in gem business and wholesale and retail trade. The demonetization of large quite denominational currency notes in the 1970 budget also affected the rich Muslims disproportionately because of their preference to accumulate savings in the form of hard currency rather than bank deposits because of the fear of dealing in the religiously accursed evil of \textit{riba} or interest.

Under the import substitution strategy textile imports from India were almost banned and one of the items that fell under the hammer was Indian \textit{palayakat} sarongs the most desired piece of attire worn by Muslim men. True, this ban later encouraged the growth of a local sarong industry in which Muslim entrepreneurs especially from the Eastern Province excelled, but the initial reaction to the ban however was one of anger and disappointment. Also, the government’s drive to conserve scarce foreign exchange led to stringent application of the law to nab foreign exchange fraudsters. A number of leading Muslim businessmen such as Mowjood, Muktar, Sally and Thaha were arrested by the police, sued and incarcerated for breach of foreign exchange rules and commercial frauds\textsuperscript{20}. These arrests, subsequent court proceedings and imprisonment received maximum publicity in the local print and voice media, thereby damaging considerably the public image of the Muslim community. It was perhaps as a measure of controlling this damage that Nalim Hajiar, a leading gem merchant and a foremost Muslim philanthropist publicly donated to the government 1.5 million rupees worth of foreign exchange from his Convertible Rupee Account on 14 August 1974\textsuperscript{21}. Even then, the cynics did not fail to doubt the legitimacy of his wealth since in December that year he was falsely charged, investigated and eventually acquitted over foreign exchange
malpractices\textsuperscript{22}. All in all Muslims faced enormous economic challenges under the United Front Government.

More than in the economic front it was from the education side that the second wave of anti-Muslim hysteria received its oxygen. To understand this new development it is necessary to comprehend the political changes that took place within the Muslim community on the eve of the 1970s. The Muslim leadership during this time underwent a radical change and was centred round the charismatic personality of Dr. Badi-ud-din Mahmud (1904-1997) who was a founder member of the SLFP, one of its vice-presidents, and above all was instrumental, a fact less known to many, in urging Srimavo Bandaranike the wife of Sri Lanka’s fourth Prime Minister S.W.R. De Bandaranaike, who was assassinated in 1957, to enter politics and take over the party leadership. The letter he addressed to her on 19 October 1959 while he was the nation’s representative at the United Nations played a key role in transforming the widow from a housewife to a politician, leader and Prime Minister\textsuperscript{23}. When the SLFP came to power in 1960 Badi, as he was popularly called, was appointed to the senate and from there to the cabinet as the first Muslim Minister of Education. He was given the same portfolio in the 1977 United Front Government also. Before becoming a minister, Mahmud, a product of the Aligar University in India, was the Principal of Zahira College in Gampola in the Kandy District. He also founded the Islamic Socialist Front (ISF) in 1969 which operated under the shadow of the SLFP. With nearly 100 branches and 6000 members ISF was able to succeed in breaking the UNP-held monopoly over the Muslim votes\textsuperscript{24}. Being an educationist himself he realised, like a few previous Muslim leaders such as Siddi Lebbe, Razik Fareed, and T. B. Jaya \textsuperscript{25}, that if his community were to progress in independent Sri Lanka it has to take up education in earnest and enter the various professional fields. Having witnessed at firsthand how his government’s economic reforms were affecting the Muslim community he was determined to rectify that economic loss by diverting the community’s energy and talent towards educational advancement. In the famous ‘tea party’ he held in October 1970 at his residence he warned his co-religionist elite guests of the impending economic reforms of his government and urged them to accept the socialist direction and take to small-scale enterprises to survive in the future\textsuperscript{26}. 
The second term of Mahmud as education minister was arguably the more remarkable for its educational upliftment of the Muslim community. Through an accelerated programme of building more and improving existing Muslim schools (both primary and secondary), opening Teacher Training Colleges exclusively for Muslim men and women, and offering teaching jobs to any Muslim who successfully completed the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) Examination (equivalent to grade 10) he radically transformed within a short period of time the popular image of his people from a ‘business community’, a description evolved during colonial times, to a ‘master (teacher) community’. Some statistics would help to illustrate Muslim achievements in education during the Mahmud era. Between 1965-66 and 1980 the number of Muslim schools increased from 505 to 649 and of them nearly 100 had pre-university classes. In 1960 there were a total of 2,500 Muslim teachers (trained and untrained), but by 1965 at the end of Mahmud’s first term as minister that number had swelled to 4,000, and by 1977 at the end of his second term it increased further to 7,000 of which more than 300 were graduates. An important milestone during Mahmud’s second term as minister was the introduction of the controversial standardization scheme and district quota system for university admissions. These measures meant that raw marks alone obtained by candidates in open competitive university entrance examination were insufficient to gain admission to university faculties. It was argued by the government that the new measures were necessary to redress the over/under representation of urban/rural students on the one hand and the over/under representation in the medicine, engineering and science faculties of Tamil/Sinhalese students on the other. However, the standardization scheme and quota system proved to be manna to the Muslim community which for a long time had neglected higher education and therefore found under-represented in the undergraduate population. For example, in 1969-70 of a total intake of 3,129 students only 107 were Muslims and of which only 13 were admitted to the science faculties including engineering and medicine; but by 1977 while 153 of a total of 3,979 graduands were Muslims 41 of them were in the science faculties. In the 1980/81 university intake a total of 170 Muslims gained university admissions amongst them sixty-six were in the science faculties. In short, but for Badi-ud-din Mahmud’s efforts the growth
of a Muslim intellectual and professional class that exists today in Sri Lanka would have had a much longer gestation period.

It was this dedicated service to his community that became an eyesore to a section of the Sinhalese nationalist politicians at that time. Even De Silva, the historian’s comment that “In his hands this cabinet post became at once a political base and a fountain of patronage, to be used to strengthen the ties between his community and the party to which he belonged ...” should be evaluated in this context of political envy and ethno-nationalism.

Even from within the cabinet there were bitter criticisms against the minister accusing him of showing special favouritism to Muslims. In fact, the Member of Parliament from the Gampola electorate in the Central Province where Mahmud lived was very indiscreet and vicious in his criticism and was alleged to have been instrumental in whipping up an anti-Mahmud campaign with the help of supportive Buddhist monks. The Tamil students in Jaffna also accused the minister, demonstrated violently and burnt his effigy for victimizing them under the standardization scheme and quota system. Mahmud responded to the criticisms by asserting that he was only giving the Muslims their due share of the national cake, which according to him was eight per cent. He was the only minister in the cabinet who openly advocated an ethnic-based ratio of 80:12:8 for the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims respectively in distributing government funds and benefits. Factions within the cabinet conspired to dislodge Mahmud from the education portfolio and when one of the minister’s secretaries was arrested on charges of bribery and sent to prison the print and voice media had a field day and gave maximum publicity so that the minister could be discredited. Mahmud was so close to the Prime Minister that all attempts to oust him and tarnish his image failed completely. (I am personally aware of these developments since I was closely associated with the minister at that time.)

However, the anti-Mahmud campaign and the publicity it received spilled over into a wider anti-Muslim hysteria. As De Silva noted, “by 1973 anti-Muslim sentiment was kindled among the Sinhalese by charges of favoured treatment of Muslims in the sphere of education. In 1974-75 there were sporadic Sinhalese-Muslim clashes in various parts of the island, with a dangerous confrontation at Gampola in the last week of 1975.” The worst riot erupted in
1976 in Puttalam, a Muslim pocket in the north-west of the island. The fundamental cause of this riot was more economic than religious or educational. It arose out of the controversy over the location of a bus stand. In Sri Lanka as in many developing countries bus stands are usually erected either at the centre of a town or closer to the bazaar and shops. Petty traders, pavement hawkers and private taxis do roaring business in and around this area. In the Puttalam bus stand the majority of businesses that thrived in the 1970s belonged to Muslims although a few Sinhalese and Tamil businesses were also present. However, a Buddhist monk with the assistance of some Sinhalese bureaucrats was demanding for some time the bus stand be shifted to a location where there are more Sinhalese than Muslims. It was this simmering grievance at the loss of economic benefits that triggered the violence when, on 4 January 1976, a bus driver attacked a Muslim man who allegedly tried to jump the queue to enter the bus34. The troubles lasted for over a month and when it subsided 18 Muslims were dead by police shooting, 271 Muslim families lost their homes, 47 shops were set ablaze of which 44 belonged to Muslims and 3 to Sinhalese and at least one mosque was completely destroyed35 (Ibid.)

The economic significance of the Puttalam bus stand controversy was later reflected in the anti-Muslim attitude of some Sinhalese drivers and conductors who worked for the Ceylon Transport Board. Hitherto it was almost an unwritten convention for drivers and conductors who worked on long distance bus routes to break journey for refreshments and rest closer to a restaurant which was invariably owned by a Muslim. Even today Muslim restaurants in Sri Lanka are famous for serving tasty meals and refreshments. As a token of gratitude for bringing customers to his restaurant the restaurateur did not charge for the meals and drinks supplied to the driver and conductor. This patronage of Muslim restaurants began to change after the seventies when Sinhalese drivers shifted their preference to Sinhalese owned restaurants - a phenomenon tantamount to an economic boycott of Muslim businesses, which was to become more systematic in the fourth wave.

Third Wave (1980s-2009)

The second wave subsided with the change of government in 1977. Even Mahmud after years of service to Muslims in the face of stiff opposition and
criticism from other community leaders was defeated, when he contested for the first time the densely Muslim populated multimember constituency, Batticaloa in the Eastern Province. The UNP was once again back in power under the leadership of a politically astute septuagenarian J. R. Jayewardena who staged a U-turn in economic policy by giving up dirigisme for a free market open economy – a change that was obviously welcomed by the Muslims. An equally radical change was his decision to abandon the Westminster parliamentary system in favour of a hybrid executive presidential model – a change that was to initiate a fundamental and dangerous shift in Muslim politics from pragmatism to ethno-religious-centric.

The third wave of Muslim-phobia that swept the north and east of the island however, was the direct outcome of the July 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom. President Jayewardena in allowing this mayhem to continue for ten days and by viewing it as a “defensive response” and “just punishment” for Tamil violence against the Sinhalese36 unwittingly became the ‘midwife’ not of a revolution, as often prematurely predicted by the leftists, but of a civil war that engulfed the nation for over twenty-five years. With nearly one-third of the Muslims living in the north and east of the country - a region claimed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as the traditional Tamil homeland, the community was caught in the crossfire. From the beginning of their armed struggle the LTTE endeavoured to get the support of the Muslims of the region. In fact, a few Muslim young men joined the rebels’ fighting cadre. Yet, the Muslim leaders took a pragmatic approach and maintained strict neutrality between the Sinhalese and Tamil warring camps. This neutrality was shattered by the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress in 1985, an ethnic-religious political party under the leadership of M. H. M. Ashraff. The situation became intolerable to the LTTE and it carried out a systematic program of eliminating Muslim leaders including Ashraff, robbing Muslim businesses, seizing Muslim farms and confiscating assets owned by Muslims37. Eravur and Kattankudy in the Eastern Province in 1985 and 1990 saw the worst of LTTE’s butchery of Muslims in the east 38 and in the north in 1990 LTTE’s action took the shape of a ‘final solution’ to the Muslim ‘menace’ by evicting the entire Muslim population of between 75,000 – 100,000 from their homes with forty-eight hour notice39. In the east also more than 12,700 Muslim families were chased out by the LTTE40. It was simply a terror campaign of ethnic cleansing. In
addition, the LTTE supporters also called Tamil consumers to boycott Muslim businesses.

Political strategy however dictated to Governments in Colombo that the Muslim community should be protected and that the LTTE’s victims be allowed to settle in Sinhalese areas, partly out of a fear that not to do so would drive the Muslims to support and strengthen the LTTE, and partly to demonstrate to the international community that the government wants to protect the minorities and work with them to maintain the pluralist character of Sri Lanka’s democracy. To the Muslims of the north and east the third wave was calamitous in every sense.

**Fourth wave (post-2009)**

With the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 and the humiliation of Tamil political leadership triumphalism and malevolence invaded the victor’s mindset. A historical fear about the Tamil community nurtured over centuries by nationalistic historians and Sinhalese politicians finally seems to have evaporated from the Sinhalese psyche and the idea that Sri Lanka is for Sinhala-Buddhists and for Buddhism only with limited tolerance for other religions and ethnic groups, as so eloquently articulated by nationalist leaders like Dharmapala in the early years of the 20th century, re-emerged with greater resolute and political backing. If not openly supported at least benevolently tolerated by the SLFP-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) Government ultranationalist organizations like the BBS, its surrogate parent JHU and the Sinhala Ravaya (SR) have formed the BBS-JHU-SR unholy trinity to unleash a vicious campaign to terrorise the Muslims, destroy their economy and demonize Islam through acts of intimidation, insult, incendiaryism, and outright thuggery. There are, according to one Muslim journalist, eight Sinhalese and ten English language websites that “portray the island’s Muslim community as a threat to Sinhalese, Buddhism, Sinhalese culture and the country as a whole”41. The unique feature of the fourth wave is that it is taking place in the era of the social media, which facilitates the spread of anti-Muslim memes42 faster and wider within the Buddhist middle class and youth mindset.

The destruction of a 400 years old Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura in 2011, the demolition of the Khairiya Jumma mosque in Dambulla in 2012, the forceful
occupation of Dafther Jailani - another Muslim shrine in Kuragala in 2013 and the attack on the Grandpass mosque in Colombo in the same year were the most blatant acts of vandalism and Islamophobia unleashed by the BBS-JH-SR trinity. In all of them Buddhist monks had participated under the protection of the national security forces. Among the many Muslim businesses looted and destroyed by this mob were two leading textile establishments, Fashion Bug in Pepiliyana in March 2013 and Nolimit in Panadura in June 2014. Muslim success in retail business has been a menacing eyesore to a number of Sinhalese competitors who want to monopolise the country’s retail trade. The worst of the violence however, took place in Alutgama, a Muslim town in the south, in June 2014 in which 9 Muslims were reported to have been killed, 176 injured of whom 11 seriously, 86 Muslim shops and 29 Muslim houses burnt with another 34 houses and 16 vehicles damaged and 16 shops looted. An Update of “Muslim Concerns” presented by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 2013 has enumerated a total of 241 anti-Muslim incidents between January and December 2013 of which 51 were violent.

Unlike the first three waves the fourth, which continues unabated, has an “international dimension” attached to it. From the last quarter of the 20th century the world of Islam has been in a state of political turmoil. Periodic political eruptions in the Middle East and the birth of political Islam in the wake of a religious resurgence have sent shock waves around the world and impacted the inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony of several plural societies. Sri Lanka is no exception to this general phenomenon. How these developments in the Middle East impacted Sri Lankan Muslims and how it was utilised by the advocates of ultra-Buddhist-nationalism in attempting to Buddhisize the Sri Lankan economy and polity have already been dealt with elsewhere. A new international element however - the intrusion of Israel, has now added fuel to the anti-Muslim fire.

**The Israel Influence**

Until J.R. Jayewardena decided to “go even to (the) devil to get help” to fight the LTTE, and allowed Israel to open an “Interest Section” within the US Embassy, Israel’s relations with Sri Lanka had been very marginal. The civil war changed all this. During the civil war however the Israelis sold weapons and
other military equipment and provided military training not only to the Sri Lankan government security forces but also to the LTTE fighting cadre. When Muslim parliamentarians on the government side protested against Jayewardena’s decision he promptly told them, “If the Muslims wanted they can remain in the government, otherwise they can leave”.

Although the Interest Section was closed in June 1990 by Jayewardena’s successor, President Premadasa, and diplomatic ties with Israel were discontinued, relations resumed in 2000 with Indian mediation and Israel’s influence within the Buddhist ultranationalists is currently on the rise. Employment opportunities provided for Sri Lankans to work as agricultural labourers in Israel is a new development that strengthens Israel’s influence even further.

The BBS-JHU-SR trinity’s claim that Sri Lanka belongs to Buddhism and Buddhists only, that Sinhalese should be the only official language, and that the minorities are allowed to live in the country only at the behest of the Buddhists and even then not on equal terms is similar to the Israeli claims about Israel, Jews, Hebrew and the status of Israeli-Arabs. These extremist views are not new but they are now propagated more openly and with silent support from the state. For the first time in the history of the country BBS in August 2014 was able to organize a counter rally in support of Israel on the same day when Sri Lankan Tawheed Jamaat organized a pro-Palestinian rally. If not the timely action by the Sub- Superintendent of Police “Colombo would have gone up in smoke”.

**The Myanmar Connection**

Soon after the 2013 anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar led by the monk Ashin Wiratu - who was identified by the *Time* magazine of 20 June 2013 as “The Face of Buddhist Terror” - and his 969 Buddhist movement BBS was quick to establish contacts with him and 969. There were reciprocal visits between the two leaderships. A memorandum of understanding signed between BBS and the 969 movement in September 2014 in Sri Lanka marks the culmination of this ethno-Buddhist alliance. BBS also sought and failed to form a similar alliance with the Indian Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak (RSS) to fight Islamic extremism in the region.
Naturally, the Sri Lankan Muslims are alarmed at these developments and are even more worried of the passive support the government of the country is alleged to be rendering to the anti-Muslim rage of BBS-JHU-SR trinity.

**Issues of Contention**

Forcing halal food on Buddhist consumers through Muslim food outlets, proliferation of mosques all over the island, vigorous conversion of Buddhists to Islam and a disproportionate growth rate of Muslim population are the main issues around which the current anti-Muslim campaign is spinning. To start with, there is absolutely no evidence of Muslims of Sri Lanka force feeding the Buddhists with halal food. However, in the multi-billion dollar worth halal food global market if Sri Lankan food manufacturers were to compete they have no choice but to abide by the halal requirements. Unless the food they export to Muslim markets bear the halal label authenticated by a registered halal certifier their products will be discarded. In Sri Lanka there are numerous Sinhalese Buddhist food manufacturers whose products are entering the international market with halal certification. A small proportion of these exportables are also allocated for domestic consumption. BBS has maliciously picked up these halal products as evidence of halal-force-feeding.

It is true that the number of mosques in Sri Lanka have multiplied since the 1980s as part of a worldwide Muslim religious awakening. Muslims all over the world have a penchant for building mosques because they believe that there are heavenly rewards for such pious acts. According to information obtained from the Department of Muslim Affairs there are about 1800 registered and 250 unregistered mosques in the country\(^5\)\(^2\). Several of these mosques were newly built but the majority have been renovated and expanded to accommodate an increasing number of worshippers. Money collected locally as well as from diaspora Muslims working in the Gulf countries and donations from Arab governments and philanthropists had funded a number mosque projects. However, the alien architecture of these mosques and the use of loud speakers for *adhan* or the prayer call have been issues of concern for other communities in the country. There had been court cases over the issue of *adhan*\(^5\)\(^3\). Yet, the important factor is that all these mosques have been built on land legally obtained from the governments in power.
Regarding religious conversion BBS is accusing both Christianity as well as Islam for luring the Buddhists to give up their faith and convert to Islam and Christianity with promises of employment and marriage. The same sort of objection was raised in India too by the RSS. According to one source a total of 101,319 people surveyed in 2011 had said to have converted to Islam, up from 65,755 surveyed in 1981. In a democratic society where there is freedom of and from religion one cannot prevent voluntary conversions. There is hardly any evidence of forced conversions to Islam in Sri Lanka.

The most sinister allegation is about the rate of growth of Muslim population. This issue also has an international dimension in the sense that journalists like Christopher Caldwell uses statistics on birth rates among various communities in Europe to raise the alarm that the continent will be swamped by Muslims by the middle of the present century. Study of fertility trends in Sri Lanka indeed shows that the Sri Lankan Moors have an edge over the other communities in this respect and that their number, if continues to increase at the current rate, will overtake the Tamils in 10.5 years and the Sinhalese in 163.65 years. Kannangara therefore advocates that “such pockets of relatively high fertility performance” be identified and “specifically designed family planning activities suitable for such cultures” be implemented “in order to complement and strengthen acceptance of ongoing social change”. Simplistic statistical estimations devoid of deeper analysis into the economic and sociological factors that affect demographic transition within different communities had provided a pseudo-theoretical edifice to the current anti-Muslim wave.

Allied to this so called demographic explosion of Muslims is the allegation that they are also disproportionately concentrating and thereby causing an ethnic imbalance in traditional Sinhalese suburbs like Dehiwela near the capital city of Colombo. There are two reasons why this happened over the last two or three decades. Firstly, the Muslims of Sri Lanka because of their overwhelming interest in trade and commerce have always been more of an urban rather than a rural community. Almost all census reports vouch for this fact. However, when the open economy was reintroduced after 1977 Colombo once again became a magnet for investors, entrepreneurs and businessmen. Secondly, when in the 1990s the LTTE began its campaign of ethnic cleansing in the North and East many Muslims migrated towards the capital, bought residential
properties and settled permanently. As a result Muslim population in the Colombo District increased from 9.94 per cent in 1981 to 11.76 per cent in 2011, whereas the percentage of Buddhists rose slightly from 70.44 to 70.66 in the same period. In Dehiwela itself Muslims counted 17,870 out of a total of 87,834 in 2011, a percentage of 20 as against 60 per cent of Sinhalese\textsuperscript{58}.

The issues of halal food, multiplicity of mosques, religious conversions and population growth rates and internal migration however, are in actual fact convenient covers to hide the extremists’ real concern about rising Muslim competition in business and education sectors. The open economy ushered in after 1977 was a welcome relief to the Muslim businessmen whose economic dynamism and commercial enterprise was repressed by the socialist experiment of the SLFP Government in the 1960s and 1970s. In the post-1977 competitive environment Muslim businesses started picking up and some of them outbid their Sinhalese and Tamil rivals. Muslim owned retail firms like Fashion Bug and Nolimit referred to earlier are prime examples of Muslim commercial success, which obviously earned the envy of the Sinhalese petty bourgeoisie. Parallel to this economic revival were the employment opportunities that opened up in the Middle East after 1980 which motivated even unskilled Muslims to migrate in search of higher earnings. During the presidency of Ranasinghe Premadasa (1989-1993) when public servants with more than 20 years of service were allowed to retire, even though their pensions were to be paid after the age of fifty-five, many Muslim teachers opted to retire and either established their own private businesses or went over to the Middle East. Thus, business opportunities at home and employment opportunities abroad combined to improve the living conditions of at least a minority of Muslim families and they invested their surpluses in the booming property market. The BBS and its supporters are now campaigning to urge the Sinhalese not to sell property to Muslims.

By the end of the 1990s the Muslim community has made significant strides in the field of education, thanks to the services rendered by the former minister of education Badiuddin Mahmud. There is now a class of Muslim professionals and young university graduates with competency in all three languages, namely Sinhalese, Tamil and English competing for jobs in the private and public sectors. It was the English educated Tamils’ domination of the public
service in the 1950s that provoked the Sinhalese nationalists at that time to introduce the Sinhalese Only Bill in the parliament as a measure of guaranteeing public sector jobs to the Sinhalese. Now, the Muslim competitors are becoming a new threat to the Sinhalese predominance in public service. On 7 January 2013 the BBS stormed the Law College at Hultsdorf to protest against releasing the examination results alleging that they were distorted to favour the Muslims. This was later investigated and found not to be true. This incident clearly indicates the extremists’ worry over Muslim competition in the field of education also.

All this is viewed by the BBS-JHU-SR trinity as signs of rising Muslim dominance which the trinity wants to be checked, and hence the anti-Muslim campaign to (a) urge Sinhalese consumers to boycott Muslim businesses and property owners not to sell property to Muslims, (b) instigate Sinhalese hooligans to damage and destroy Muslim buildings and homes, and (c) encourage Sinhalese public officials to practice open discrimination against Muslims. A repetition of 1915 Sinhalese-Muslim riots but on the scale of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom is not entirely out of the trinity’s short-to-mid-term plan of action.

**Muslim Response and Future**

Except during the third wave, when at least a section of Muslims of the East were allowed to defend their villages and towns against LTTE violence with weapons supplied to them under a state sponsored Home Guards security measure, the Muslim community never resorted to any chivalrous solution to their inter-ethnic or inter-religious issues. Both under British colonial rule as well as after independence they always looked to the state for redressing grievances. This was the essence of their politics of pragmatism. Even the formation of the SLMC did not deviate from this peaceful strategy. There were two factors that acted as a kind of safety-valve that protected the Muslims from violence caused by Sinhalese extremism. One was their position as the second minority and the psychological fear that haunted the Buddhist mindset for centuries about the political threat from the first minority, the Tamils. Protracted anti-Muslim violence from the majority community always carried the danger of a possible alliance between the two minorities which would be more formidable to encounter politically; and the other was the concern about international Muslim reaction – the “external dimension” - to anti-Muslim
violence at home. With a comprehensive military defeat over the LTTE followed by delicate diplomatic manoeuvers to keep the Indian quarter quiescent on the Tamil issue the Tamil fear appears to have virtually melted, but the concern about international Muslim reaction still carries some weight. According to one journalist, “if not for that external dimension ... the fate of the Muslims might today have been much worse⁶¹”. In fact in April 2013 President Rajapakse met the resident heads of fifteen Muslim countries and assured them that he would not tolerate any disturbance to religious harmony in Sri Lanka⁶².

Can the Muslim community rely on this external dimension for its future safety and peaceful coexistence in the country? At least two historical experiences from two different contexts demonstrate that such reliance has only limited value. The first experience comes from the Sri Lankan Tamil community that relied very heavily on both the Indian central and Tamil Nadu state governments for support to their struggle. A detailed discussion on the vagaries of Indian responses is beyond the scope of this analysis; but from the author’s personal contacts with diaspora Tamils it becomes clear that they are frustratingly disappointed at the Indian quiescence so far. The second experience is from the Palestinian reliance on the Arab countries in their struggle for an independent state. Here again the outcome has been abysmally poor. The reality is that in the operation of the current post-Westpahalian nation state structure it is the promotion of national interest that remains paramount to every government and that the interest of outsiders, unless they directly impinge upon the national interest, receive only peripheral concern. This is the real politik that minorities face.

Given this fact it will be an uphill task for local minorities to motivate their ethnic or religious foreign brethren to come to their aid in times of crisis. In the case of the Sri Lankan Muslim community, foreign Muslim governments can only provide limited assistance to ameliorate the current painful experience. The real and long lasting solution has to be indigenous. With inflationary pressures on peoples’ living standards, acute joblessness amongst the educated and unchecked political authoritarianism even the majority community is now realising that ethnic politics is the bane of Sri Lanka. Only a broad coalition of progressive forces comprising of all ethnic communities can
bring peace and prosperity to the supposed "Thomas More’s Socialist Utopia". The future of the Muslim community therefore depends on whether it is prepared to give up its own post-1990 ethno-religiouscentric politics and move towards a secular national coalition. This requires a visionary leadership from the community which unfortunately appears to be in short supply at the moment.

Notes:

8. H. R. Pate, ibid., p. 485.
10. Robert Chalmers to the Secretary of State, 11 August 1915, Court Documents. 8167.
18. Abdul Cader Lebbe (1913-1984), a well-known philosopher poet of Sri Lanka and a keen observer of the progress of his community has left with me a handwritten manuscript in which he has recorded a number of critical comments about the Muslims by various Sinhalese and Tamil politicians. For example, Colvin R. de Silva of the LSSP and a minister in ULG was said to have compared the Muslims’ attachment to the country with that of the cattle to the grass where the cattle graze but do not bother about growing the fodder.
22. *Ibid*.
42. Richard Dawkins in his *Selfish Gene* borrows the biological metaphor and defines memes as “units of cultural transmission” which can be “an idea, behaviour, style or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture”. See, Linda Herrera, *Revolution In The Age Of Social Media*, London & New York: Verso, 2014, p. 116.
43. L. Farook, *op.cit. passim*
46. Ameer Ali, “Political Buddhism, Islamic Orthodoxy and Open Economy ...”, *op.cit.*
52. I wish to thank M.P.M. Jaleel for obtaining this piece of information.
53. Ameer Ali, “Political Buddhism, Islamic Orthodoxy and Open Economy ...”, *op.cit.*
57. Dilrook Kannangara, *op.cit.*
60. Ameer Ali, “Political Buddhism, Islamic Orthodoxy and Open Economy ...”, *op.cit.*
61. Izeth Hussain, *op.cit.*
63. Laksiri Fernando identifies Sri Lanka as Thomas More’s Socialist Utopia. See his *Thomas More’s Socialist Utopia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka)*, 2014, (place of publication not identified).