



Sri Lanka Muslim Congress' Rise to Power

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Out of the total population of Sri Lanka, the Muslim community constitutes about 8%, while the Buddhist majority makes up 69,1%. Still, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, a Muslim political party, has been a significant player in the Sri Lankan political arena since the early 1990s. This article explores how they managed to gain support as quickly as they did, from the early 1980s to the present, and how they were able to become one of the most important minority political parties in the country. In order to understand the empirical data presented here, the reader first needs a brief introduction to the most important recent events in the country's Muslim community.

During the 1970s, the Muslim community consolidated its group identity in many ways. This change was influenced by several factors, related to for instance educational reforms, business development, economic prosperity, and the international Islamic revival. While the educational reform was successful for Sri Lankan Muslims, the Government of Sri Lanka's (GoSL) relations with Tamil groups worsened; the latter group perceived the GoSL as favoring Muslims over Tamils. Rage grew within some Tamil youth groups, leading to major conflicts in the 70s. The 1983 riots between Tamils and Sinhalese changed the nature of the conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and GoSL from a secessionist campaign to civil war. However, the Muslim question was not a major reason underlying the conflict; in fact, the Indo-Lanka accord (a peace agreement signed in 1987, which among other things proposed the merger of the north and east provinces) makes no mention of the community.

Sri Lankan Muslims, most of whom did not participate in the conflict, developed business interests in trade and commerce, primarily after the lifting of heavy restrictions on international trading by the GoSL in 1977. The increased number of educated Muslims and their rising economic status strengthened the shared Muslim identity in the country. A Muslim middle class began to emerge in south-west Sri Lanka. The Islamic revival that reached the island in the 70s, which was introduced mainly by missionary, or so called da'wa, groups, such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Tablighi Jamaat, played an important role in the rising number of mosques and Muslim schools on the island.

THE CHANGE IN MUSLIM POLITICS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SRI LANKA MUSLIM CONGRESS

Sri Lankan Muslims began organizing in political movements in the 1970s and 80s. Two of the biggest Muslim organizations in this development were the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF). The SLMC began as a social movement in 1981, and became a political party in 1986. However, due to lacking organization, they were not recognized as such by the election commission until 1988. The leader of the SLMC, the late Muhammad H.M. Ashraff, did not believe that the Tamil struggle for an independent state was an issue for Muslims. MULF, on the other hand, joined the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and supported their politics. Ultimately, it was the SLMC that was the more successful of the two organizations, and MULF chose to merge with it in 1996.



Around the time of the SLMC's foundation, a number of conflicts between Muslims and Tamils played out. The SLMC's success led to violence between the LTTE and Muslim groups, especially manifesting in riots during the late 80s. The Muslim-Tamil riots reached a critical point in 1990 when, for reasons that are not entirely clear, approximately 100.000 Muslims were forced to leave their homes by the LTTE. Some of these Internally Displaced Persons have returned to their homes, while some still live in livelihood camps in other parts of the country.

Initially, the SLMC focused on questions pertaining to Muslims in the eastern parts of the country. The conflict strengthened Muslim identity and the SLMC rapidly gained support and won 29 seats in the provincial elections and four seats in the parliamentary elections in 1988. During the 1989-1992 period, the Sri Lankan parliament was dominated by the United National Party (UNP), which held a majority of over 50%. The SLMC supported the UNP, and Ahsraff received the Portfolio of Minister of Port Development, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction.

There are basically three lines of thought regarding the SLMC's success and how it was affected by the increasing separation between Sri Lankan Muslims and other ethnic groups in the country, which focus on the GoSL/Tamil Tigers conflict, the SLMC as a regional party, and minority politics, respectively.

THE CONFLICT AS A FACTOR

The fact that the Muslim community had not taken part in the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils is often attributed to them constituting a third party. Few Muslims felt the urge to fight alongside the LTTE; although they shared Tamil as a language and were discriminated in the educational sector in the 1970-80s, they did not feel a connection with the Tamils. According to Devanesan Nesiah, Muslims constitute their own community, referring to themselves as Muslims even though they represent different ethnicities and languages. Consequently, when the conflict between the LTTE and GoSL escalated into violence in 1983 the majority of Muslims did not participate.

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Prior to 1983, Sri Lankan Muslims and Tamils shared several things. Besides having a common language, there was also a religious connection. The Tamil language can be found among both the Muslim and Hindu populations, but even though there was a divide between religious practices they shared religious temples and festivals. Before the outbreak of conflict there was relative ethnic harmony; some researchers have

even concluded that Muslims and Hindu Tamils lived together and shared rituals. After 1983, this led to a Tamil-Muslim conflict and social change in the east. Because of the conflict, Muslims generally felt a need to separate themselves from Tamils and not get involved in the armed conflict. The Tamil-Muslim relationship worsened in the early 1990s when the LTTE evicted thousands of Muslim from the north. The educational sector, for instance, used to have Tamil teachers, but these were replaced to a certain extent with the coming of Muslim schools.

The conflict served as the basis for a reactive politico-cultural ideology, which fostered the construction and development along lines similar to those of Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalistic ideologies. Sri Lankan Muslims are basically a heterogeneous community like other ethnic communities, although there is a growing homogenizing tendency among Muslims, of which the SLMC is a good example. This is explained as a global consequence of the wide-spread Islamization of the 1970s. Organizations like Jamaat-

e-Islami and Tabligh Jamaat, which are regarded as having had a great impact on Islamization processes over the past few decades, are seen as important factors in similar developments in Sri Lanka. The SLMC is not, however, without its internal diversity or confrontations, especially evident between members from the southern and the eastern parts of the country.

The Islamization of Sri Lanka can be seen through a number of manifestations. Notably the number of mosques and sharia schools built has increased, and Muslim women have taken to wear hijab in increasing numbers since the 1980s, where few had done so before. This signals an ideology of ethnic identity with roots in a particular sociopolitical condition of both local and global character, which activates and intensifies ethnic tensions in plural societies.

The conflict had an effect of shaping ethnic identities in economic and political spheres, considerably affecting and transforming the Muslim community as a third party. Muslims were removed from government jobs and started their own companies. The middle class, in the context of ethnic competition, developed into a political force whose demand for “Muslim rights” and Muslim development, both in their substance and in the rationale behind them, conflicted with the conciliatory strategies and rhetoric of earlier Muslim elites working in the Sinhalese parties. The sentiment of “Muslim rights” and the invigorated Muslim religious identity are both indirect creations of the ethnic conflict, from the basis of what we can call “a composite of Islamic identity.” This composite embraces not only a desire for the promotion and protection of Muslim cultural and religious life, but also envelopes a passion for socio-economic advancement and social recognition. This explains the SLMC’s successes in elections during the 1990s. Though the SLMC was a party that concentrated on the Muslim situation in the east, they were supported by middle class Muslims in the south-west.

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THE SLMC AS A REGIONAL PARTY

There is research that points out that the SLMC amplified the Muslim voice in Sri Lanka, though not to the point of successfully unifying the Muslim community. Muslim politics before the SLMC was not based on the Koran, but rather had a regional base. For example, the issues of Muslims in the east were handled separately, while the SLMC was viewed a Muslim party for the east.

The argument here proposes three levels on which SLMC became a successful political party. On the *local level*, the SLMC made it clear that it was a party for the Muslims on the east side of the island, and wanted to lift the problems of the poor Muslims in the eastern areas. The focus on the development of education for Muslims in the east is an important reason for the support of the SLMC. People became aware of their situation and grew more politically active in the 1980s. This realization combined with the situation on the *national level* in the 80s, when the conflict began and the Muslim community was affected by the civil war. The SLMC argued that there was an urgent need to focus on Muslim security because of the war. The ethnic conflict forced the Muslims to organize themselves politically. When the Indo-Lanka Accord, a peace agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eleam and India, was signed in 1987, the Muslim community was completely neglected, bringing the Muslim vote to the SLMC. The third and final level is the *international level*; as already mentioned the global trend of Islamic revivalism developing in the 1970s and onward significantly affected Sri Lankan Muslim politics.

Analyses of the voting statistics from eastern Sri Lanka in the 1980 election show a clear majority of Muslim votes for the SLMC. The party constantly worked to make sure that the Muslim voice in the east was heard. The statistics also show that it is likely that voters will turn their back on the SLMC if the party were to leave their regional base and attempt to become a national party. The Muslims on the east coast are very poor compared to their west-coast coreligionists and so have different political interests.

MINORITY POLITICS

Tamils had dominated minority politics in Sri Lanka for decades. This changed in 1986 when the SLMC became a political party and began gaining supporters and then votes. Muslims had tended to work within major Sinhalese parties like the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). When civil war broke out in 1983, there were a lot of clashes between all three ethnic groups. Muslims, especially in the east, felt left out from the big Sinhalese parties. The creation of the SLMC was a means of distancing themselves from both Sinhalese and Tamils.

The SLMC's formation was in part due to Muslims feeling that they wanted to distance themselves from fighting Tamil groups. However, the SLMC took a clear stand in their ethnic agenda and joined forces in parliament with the major Sinhalese parties. This collaboration has, over the years, afforded the SLMC some influence in the government. In 2001, the SLMC further distanced itself from the Tamils because of Tamil-Muslim conflicts in the east and north, making it a typical minority party.

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Even though the Muslims of Sri Lanka constitute only 8% of the population, they are represented in almost all electoral constituencies. Due to this geographical distribution they have become a powerful factor in deciding the political fortunes of the major parties like the United National Party and Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

The SLMC's emergence was perceived as a Muslim attempt to assert their identity, and it did challenge and

change the conventional Muslim leadership. The center of Muslim politics shifted from Colombo and the south to the rural east, leading to a dramatic change in the balance of Muslim politics. The SLMC encouraged Muslim nationalism through religion, where other ethnic communities have emphasized language. The political strategy and pragmatism of the SLMC leaders played a vital role in securing a place for the party in national politics.

Clashes between Muslims and Tamils in the early years of the 90s are important for an understanding of why the SLMC was so successful. They led to growing tensions between the two communities and consequently the SLMC emerged as a protector of the rights of Muslims. Later on, the SLMC demanded a separate Muslim provincial council in the south-eastern province, a demand that can be identified as a manifestation of Muslim nationalism in Sri Lanka. Currently, the Muslim community faces the challenge of seizing the moment, as it were, of sorting out all internal differences, and of bringing about unity among the SLMC's membership.

CONCLUSION

A couple of variables can help clarify the SLMC's success in elections, and I believe that their achievements to date can be explained as a hodgepodge of the analyses discussed above. The idea that the conflict between the GoSL and the LTTE served as a catalyst for the formation of a Muslim political party is in my view correct. It may also explain the fact that since 1989 the SLMC has gained a large enough

following to maintain a continuous presence in Sri Lankan parliament. This is, as I see it, the main reason why they have become so successful. In significant respects the Muslim community was affected by the conflict, even though they were not directly involved in the fighting.

Another interesting factor is the theory of the Islamization of the Muslim world, which I see as a valid observation in relation to the SLMC's success, though only as a minor part of the explanation as to why. The argument that the SLMC should be regarded as a regional party is in my opinion wrong, even though they have often put forward special demands for the political situation in the eastern province. In my Master's thesis I analyzed the SLMC's organization and parliament speeches, in which one can clearly see that the party is nationally organized and that their parliamentary politics is clearly concerned with the entire Sri Lankan



SLMC leaders Hassan Ali and Rauff Hakeem

Muslim population. Therefore, I would rather label their politics “minority politics.” This, combined with the conflict, is the main reason why they were doing so well in the elections.

In the latest parliament elections, which took place in 2009, the SLMC parliamentary candidates ran under the UNP flag with the slogan “We are all Sri Lankans.” In parliament, the UNP and SLMC were in opposition, until the SLMC crossed over to the government (headed by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) in early 2011.

This move, I believe, could be the beginning of the end for the SLMC. In its aftermath, other Muslim parties have emerged, claiming to be the true voice of the Muslim people. The war between the GoSL and the LTTE officially ended in 2009, with the defeat of the Tamil Tigers. In the new, post-conflict, context, the SLMC needs to have a clear agenda and get back to the politics that made them successful in the first place, and run for election once more as an independent party, if they hope to remain a factor in Sri Lankan politics.

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