

# Resurgence of Ethno-Religious Sentiment against Muslims in Sri Lanka: Recent Anti-Muslim Violence in Ampara and Kandy

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## Abstract

The recent upsurge of violence against Muslims in various parts of Sri Lanka has grabbed the attention of popular discourses. However, little scholarly analysis has dealt with the recent rise of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence in the country, particularly the violence in Ampara and Kandy. As such, this article explores the implications and root causes of violence in Ampara and Kandy. This article is descriptive and interpretative in nature and mainly relies on secondary data. The article reveals that the violence in Ampara and Kandy unleashed by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners with complicity of law enforcement agencies caused much damage on the mosques, businesses and properties of Muslims. I argue that phobia against growing Muslim population, myth of sterilization pills, and economic jealousy and rivalry between Muslims and Sinhalese are the root causes of the violence against Muslims in Ampara and Kandy with some other sub-factors associated with it. Thus, there is a desperate need of better managing human and social security of all groups in the country, especially ethno-religious minorities.

**Keywords:** anti-Muslim sentiment, Sinhala Buddhist hardliners, economic rivalry, myth of sterilization pills

## 1. Introduction

Islamophobia is a contested concept in the public space in many of Western countries in the contemporary period. It implies discrimination against the resident Muslim population in the 'West' (Allen 2006). Muslims across the world bear the brunt of resentment, hatred, and racism in various countries, thanks to the acts of some perverts as they continue to associate their acts of terrorism with Islam, though such acts have nothing to do with the religion-Islam which professes peace and tranquility and abhors killing innocents. This issue is widely discussed and debated in academic discourses.

Muslims are slightly more than 9% of Sri Lanka's 20.3 million population and live dispersed throughout the country; Sinhalese are 75%, and Tamils are 11 % (Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka 2012). Muslim identity in the country has been largely contested purely because of their shared culture and language with the Tamils/Hindus. Nevertheless, scholars argue that the Muslim identity is constituted based on religion- Islam (Nuhman 2007).

Sri Lanka recently saw an upsurge of attacks against Muslims by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners in Ampara in the Eastern Province and Kandy in the Central Province, which has jeopardized the reputation of the country as it continues to struggle in the pursuit of post-war reconciliation. The democratic transition of regime change in 2015, with the defeat of Mahinda Rajapakse regime that tacitly provided political patronage to Sinhala Buddhist hardliners,(Nuhman 2016) promised to an end to ethno-religious violence in Sri Lanka. However, more than three years later, such promise of ending violence against ethno-religious minorities, particularly the Muslims is yet to be realized. Ironically, the episode of high-intensity violence targeting the Muslims persists with impunity enjoyed by certain hardline groups that propagate hatred and myths against ethno-religious minorities.

The Buddhist-Muslim tension is not a new phenomenon in the country as it goes back to Colonial era where Buddhist elites promoted Sinhala Buddhist nationalism to ensure their domination in the socio-political sphere (Obeyesekere 1979). Post-independence of the country saw the persistence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism espoused by political leaders for their political expediency (Nuhman 2016). End of civil war in May 2009, with the defeat of Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), failed to ensure peace and tranquility in the country, but

instead, it emboldened the Sinhala Buddhist leaders to intensify their ideology of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism against minorities in the post-war context.

Priorities of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists in the pursuit of suppressing the minorities shifted towards Muslims in the aftermath of war in which Tamils were the predominant victims. As such, the violence against Muslims during the post war period has exacerbated, particularly targeting their places of worship-Mosques, business centers and other aspects like cattle slaughter, their attires, dietary practices and so on. The most notable and brutal violence against Muslims by the Sinhala Buddhist hardline groups occurred in 2014 in Aluthgama, Dharga Town and Beruwala in the Kaluthura District of the Western Province (Farook 2014a). This incident itself propelled the Muslims voting en masse against the Mahinda regime which they perceived to be too lax and oblivious to the atrocities of Sinhala Buddhists hardliners towards Muslims. Although the Mahinda regime was overthrown, hatred, intolerance and racism coupled with violence against Muslims still persist even under the new coalition government. In such a context, the anti-Muslim violence in Ampara and Kandy is the recent manifestation of persistent virulent campaign against the Muslims in the post war scenario.

Relation between Sinhalese and Muslims has been very cordial until the end of the 19th century (Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka 2012). Their relations, during the war, were at the zenith as Muslims played a constructively supportive role in dealing with the LTTE threat (Subramanian 2018a). Muslims were trusted and thus they were recruited in the armed forces of Sri Lanka, as the Tamils were not trusted anymore. Needless to say, a large number of Muslims served in police, intelligence services, broadcasting facilities and so on in the country and it should be noted that the first regular police officer to die in action was constable Saybhan in 1864 at Mawanella, who was a Muslim (Sourjah 2018). History suggests that neither have Muslims colluded with Tamil militants with a view to achieving Tamil Homeland in the country, nor have they betrayed the nation in colluding with international forces to meddle with the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. This, on the contrary, has earned the wrath of Tamil militants and thus resulted in the expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province in 1990s at gun point within 24 hours (Hasbullah 1996). The LTTE drove out nearly 100,000 Muslims overnight from Jaffna and other parts of northern Sri Lanka under its control depriving their houses, lands, shops, and possessions and subsequently, they became a new set of internally displaced people in Sri Lanka's conflict (Subramanian 2018a). Nevertheless, their contribution to military service is still peculiar and remembered by the top echelons of military personals even today. Mr. Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne (March 07, 2018), who currently serves as the Chief of Defense Staff of the Sri Lanka Armed Forces, stated in a recent government media conference that,

“we are living today thanks to them (the Muslims)...Our intelligence during our conflict time was entirely run by our Muslim community ... They sacrificed their lives, they went with us in the long range recon (aissance) patrols to go to the LTTE areas, they were fluent in the language, and they protected us...” (Subramanian 2018b).

In fact, Sinhalese in general and the state in particular valued the warmth and patronage of the Muslims, leading to cordial relations between the two entities. However, such a positive trend has now drastically changed with the rising anti-Muslim violence in the contemporary Sri Lanka.

While the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism espoused by Bodu Bala Sena and other vigilante groups in Sri Lanka received much attention in popular literature including Sri Lankan journalistic sources as Groundviews and Colombo Telegraph, the recent rise of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence in Sinhala-majority regions of Sri Lanka has received little scholarly attention, particularly the violence in Ampara and Kandy. More importantly, scholarly analysis of implications of violence and factors contributing to the violence in Ampara and Kandy remains lacking in the literature. Therefore, this article explores the implications and root causes of violence in Ampara and Kandy. At the end, this article also delves into intervention strategies needed to combat the persisting ethno-religious violence in Sri Lanka. Thus, this article can be deemed as an enormous contribution to the academic discourses as it discusses and analyses by detailing anti-Muslim violence in Ampara and Kandy.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study is descriptive and interpretative in nature and mainly relies on secondary data collected from sources such as academic journals, newspapers, reports from research centers and websites. These sources have recorded the discourses and number of incidents staged by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners against Muslims in different parts of Sri Lanka including Ampara and Kandy. In addition, the anti-Muslim violence and its contributing factors are critically examined in this paper in the form of direct quotations, quotation of others, summaries and author's interpretation, all of which help support the arguments developed in this study.

The rest of this article is divided into four major parts, with concluding remarks at the end. The first part provides an extensive examination of the emergence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism from the colonial period to the contemporary era of Sri Lanka, followed by the discussion on the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the country in

the recent times. The next section contextualizes the violence in Ampara and Kandy with background and details of damages caused to the Muslim community as a result of violence. Third section explores the collusion of law enforcement agencies and state in the anti-Muslim violence in Ampara and Kandy. The fourth section explores and analyzes the key factors contributed to the violence in Ampara and Kandy. In conclusion, this study provides some thoughts on how the government and law enforcement authorities should respond to in enforcing law and order equally against all citizens of the country and bringing the perpetrators to book immediately.

### 3. Rise of Sinhala Buddhist Supremacism or Nationalism

Historically, language and religion have been the major identity marker of ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. While Sinhalese and Tamils stress on language to ascribe their identity, Muslims define their ethnicity based on religion (Nuhman 2016). Sinhala Buddhist nationalism on the basis of religion was actively promoted by Sinhala elites in order to ensure their socio-political interests during the Colonial period (Obeyesekere 2010) and they viewed minorities, particularly the Muslims as rivals in terms of socio-economic and political spheres. As such, fierce competition of Muslims in the economic sector with Sinhalese ultimately culminated in the Sinhalese Muslim racial riots of 1915 (Ali 1986). Therefore, it can be clearly understood that the economic competition with Muslims was the root cause of anti-Muslim riot in 1915 and religion and racial sentiments served as a pretext for Sinhala Buddhist nationalists to unleash anti-Muslim violence during the Colonial period.

Sinhala Buddhist ideology has largely dominated the agenda of main political parties like United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the post-independent period, though they were seen inclusive in outlook. SWRD Bandaranaike became a dominant political proponent of Sinhala Buddhist ideology and thus introduced Sinhala Only Act in 1956 soon after coming to power (Ali 2018). This really contributed to further heighten Sinhala Buddhist ideology, despite it paving the way for Tamil separatism and militarism (Kerney 1967). Thereafter, persistent agenda of successive governments such as affording 'foremost' place to Buddhism in the constitution<sup>1</sup> introducing discriminatory policies against minorities in the public sector and administration and unleashing anti-Tamil riot in 1977, 1981, and 1983 helped consolidate the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the country.

Meanwhile, formation of Jathika Chinthanaya<sup>2</sup> in 1970s was a new form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology and reflected the legacy of Anagarika Dharmapala and Walpola Rahula Thero in terms of Sinhala Buddhist ideology (Seneviratne 2004). Jathika Chinthanaya gave birth to a few political parties like Sinhala Urumaya,<sup>3</sup> which was the first Sinhala Buddhist political party that emerged in 2000s. Sinhala Urumaya (SU) espoused Sinhala Buddhist ideology in the political landscape of Sri Lanka became a successful political party securing a seat in Parliament at the 2000 General election.

Formation of Jathika Hela Urumaya<sup>4</sup> (JHU) as a political party in 2004 helped perpetuate the agenda of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the mainstream politics in Sri Lanka. Winning nine (9) seats by JHU in the Parliament in 2004 Parliamentary General Election did not augur well for the peacebuilding efforts of the country as it espoused Sinhala Buddhist ideology (Nuhman 2016).

Furthermore, ideology of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has been reinforced and consolidated with the formation of Sinhala Buddhist organizations like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)<sup>5</sup>, Ravana Balaya (RB)<sup>6</sup>, Sinhala Ravaya (SR)<sup>7</sup>, Maheson Balagaya (MB)<sup>8</sup>, which apparently propagate hostility and hatred against ethno-religious minorities in the recent times. These organizations have caused enormous challenges to ethno-religious minorities, particularly the Muslims.

### 4. Rise of Anti-Muslim Sentiment

<sup>1</sup> Section 6 of 1972 constitution indicates "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by section 18(1) (d)."

<sup>2</sup> It refers to national thought literally. It is an indigenous ideology and alternative to Marxism and Capitalism.

<sup>3</sup> It means Sinhala Heritage Party literally

<sup>4</sup> It means national Sinhala heritage party literally

<sup>5</sup> It literally means Buddhist power force.

<sup>6</sup> It literally means Demon/Ravana force.

<sup>7</sup> It literally means roar of Sinhala.

<sup>8</sup> The Sinhala word 'Maha sona' means 'big graveyard and the word 'Mahason' means 'the ghost that brings death'. The popular myth is that anyone will die when Mahason strikes. The "Mahason Force" claims to represent the interests of those who have lost their lives and those who have been maimed at the hands of terror. This group mainly operate in social media like Facebook and mobilizes youth as members of their organization.

Relations between Sinhalese and Muslims have significantly stained with the emergence of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) in 2012, which evolved as the culmination of post-war Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the country. They propagated much venom and hate against the Muslims and turned them into the next enemy enjoying the political patronage of Rajapakse regime (Gunasekara 2018). They first targeted the cultural practices of Muslims such as *Halal* logo being used in the food items produced in companies and then sold in groceries. *Halal* became the centerpiece of the BBS campaign as they strongly discounts it (Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin 2016). Subsequently, such a propaganda against Halal has prompted the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema (ACJU) to cease issuing halal certificate to numerous food producing companies. Moreover, BBS also targeted on the cattle slaughter of Muslims, particularly during the Haj festival time. This has caused much inconvenience for Muslims to perform their religious obligation during the Haj festival time. The BBS has also strongly discounted the attires of Muslim women like *abaya* (a loose fitting, long sleeved robes), *hijab* (headscarf) and *nikab* (face covering) (Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin 2016). This, on the one hand, suggests the radical dimension of Sinhala Buddhist ideology in the post-war scenario, on the other hand, drives a serious wedge between Sinhalese and Muslims.

In “Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence: A Major Threat to Ethnic Reconciliation and Ethnic Harmony in Post War Sri Lanka,” Athambawa Sarjoon et.al (2016) discusses that Muslims have become ‘another other’ and target of the extremist right wing ethno nationalists in the post war Sri Lanka in order to consolidate the agenda of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the country. He argues that the fear and minority complex of Sinhala Buddhist ideologists in the regional and global context is the cause of violence perpetrated against Muslims in Sri Lanka (Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin 2016). In the similar vein, Ahamed Sunwari Long’s et.al “Recent Campaigns against Muslims in Sri Lanka from Buddhist and Muslim Perspective” (2017) illustrates the perspective of both Buddhists and Muslims in view of the recent violence against Muslims by certain Buddhist nationalist groups. He discusses a quarter of Buddhist community subscribes to the violence perpetrated against Muslims, while another quarter of them strongly discount it. More importantly, he argues that fifty (50) percent of Buddhists adopts a moderate approach, neither supporting nor opposing such violence (Long et al. 2017).

In the continuous episode of attacks against Muslims by Sinhala Buddhist supremacists, Aluthgama violence instigated by BBS as a result of anti-Muslim rally was one of the serious incidents in the post-war situation. Incendiary speech of BBS monk Galabode Aththe Gnanasara was directly responsible for the violence (Subramanian 2018b). It resulted in the death of 3 Muslims, injured 88 people, vandalized 3 mosques and 174 houses, burnt 79 shops, and damaged 37 three wheelers and 15 other vehicles of Muslims (Mohideen 2014), and caused property damages worth of Rs. 5.8 billion. James Johan Stewart’s “Muslim-Buddhist Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka” (2014) focuses on Sinhala Buddhist Islamophobic groups and the role of social media for militant Sinhala Buddhist organizations like BBS in the instigation of anti-Muslim campaigns. He argues that the modernizing impulse and technological savvy of the BBS seems entirely compatible with continued intolerance toward religious minorities and national others (Stewart 2014). Moreover, the Secretariat for Muslims (SFM), a Muslim civil society organization, also documented 538 anti-Muslim incidents from 2013 to 2015 (Subramanian 2018b). Thus, the recent anti-Muslim violence in Ampara and Kandy is the latest manifestation of sustained Sinhala Buddhist ideology, particularly in the post war context of Sri Lanka.

#### 4.1 Anti-Muslim Violence in Ampara and Kandy

This section contextualizes anti-Muslim violence occurred in Ampara and Kandy and the extent of damage caused to properties and other aspects. Then, it moves into exploring the factors contributing to such violence that continued to occur even after the regime change in 2015.

##### 4.1.1 Anti-Muslim Violence in Ampara

The anti-Muslim violence unleashed in Ampara town on Feb 26th/27th night following the argument erupted as a result of alleged ‘sterilization pills’ found in a curry of a *kottu*<sup>9</sup> consumed by a Sinhalese from a Muslim-owned eatery/hotel. However, it was later found that it was not the sterilization pills that was found in the curry served with *kottu*, but a few puffy particles floating in the gravy of curry, which some eateries mix with flour to thicken the liquid, if the curry is too watery. The instigators of the violence claimed that Muslims were attempting to prevent Sinhalese from procreation, and aimed at de-populating the Sinhalese by mixing sterilization pills in the food served in eateries. Subsequently, the violence has caused irreparable damages. The extent of damage is shown in the following table 1.

<sup>9</sup> Spicy traditional food comprising mixture of beef, vegetable and ingredients and chopped in a hot oven.

Table 1. Number of damages in Ampara violence

Category	Number of damages
Mosque	01
Muslim Hotels	03
Grocery store	01
Building	01
Vehicles	08

(Jeyaraj 2018b)

Furthermore, a few Muslim dwellings were stoned but no families were harmed as most had taken shelter in neighboring homes or fled to shrub jungle areas. The motive of the attack against Muslims is dealt in a separate section in this essay, however, all it indicates the attack was pre-planned and aims at targeting the economic strength of Muslims.

#### 4.1.2 Anti-Muslim Violence in Kandy

Kandy, an ancestral city in Sri Lanka, is home to roughly 100,000 people and it is located in the hills of the tropical country, lush with religious relics and tea plantations. The violence in Kandy was triggered by an attack on a Buddhist truck driver from Teldeniya in Kandy by four Muslim men after a traffic dispute on February 22. The victim was immediately hospitalized and the Muslim attackers were immediately arrested and remanded. Call for retribution and anti-Islam polemics flooded in social media with the victim laying in a coma. As such, when the victim died after almost two weeks on 3rd March, Sinhala Buddhist hardliners mobilized their mobs and launch the attack on the properties of Muslims from 4th March (Gunasekara 2018). The violence in different parts of Kandy was intermittently protracted and continued for over four days and nights at a stretch despite curfews. While the allegation of 'sterilization pills' served as a pretext to stir violence against Muslims in Ampara, the death of a lorry driver served as a pretext for launching violence against Muslims in Kandy. This suggests that in an ethnically deeply divided country like Sri Lanka, ethnicity and religion can easily be exploited to ignite violence against ethno-religious minorities. The scope and scale of violence in Kandy was intense and more widespread than that of Amparai. The extent of damage in Kandy violence is given below in the table 2.

Table 2. Number of damages in Kandy Violence

Category	Full	Partial	Minor	Total
Mosques	01	06	10	17
Houses	30	71	188	289
Business places	37	80	100	217
Vehicles	41	14	27	82

('Report of All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema, Kandy Branch' 2018)

Although the violence began in Digana and Teldeniya, it spread to some other areas in the district causing enormous damage to the properties of the people. Thus, the damage caused to Muslims in various areas is shown below in the table.

Table 3. Number of damage in various areas in Kandy

DS divisions	Families	Persons	Death	Critically injured	Houses		Mosques		Business		Vehicles	
					Fully	Partially	Fully	Partially	Fully	Partially	Fully	Partially
Harispatuwa	135	675			1	101		4	5	28	3	13
Poojapitiya	35	175			1	19		1	3	12	9	3
Medhadumbara	25	125							2	2		4
Kundasale	236	1180	1	1	28	82	1	4	23	103	23	6
Pathadumbara	33	165				26		2		7	2	8
Gangawata Korala	30	150				12		2	1	17	3	2
Akuruna	27	135				17		3	3	7	1	5
Yatinuwara	06	30				2				4		
Mahanuwara												
Total	527	2635	1	1	30	259	1	16	37	180	41	41

(‘Report of All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema, Kandy Branch’ 2018)

Another account suggests that the anti-Muslim violence in Kandy left three people dead and nearly 200 Muslim businesses and homes destroyed, and eleven mosques were attacked (Wettimuny 2018). Moreover, over 325 Muslim families were displaced in different parts of Kandy. The death of a Muslim boy was caused when he got trapped in a burning building and choked on the fumes. Physical harm experienced by Muslims was comparatively low because most people had been able to run away on time and mobs were not interested in causing physical harm to people (Jeyaraj 2018a). This shows that the objective of the perpetrators of violence was not to kill or assault Muslims, but to cause massive damage on the economy of Muslims. Moreover, the Divisional Secretariat of Menikinna reports that the total loss of Kandy violence incurred by Muslims is estimated around one billion in rupees (Samad 2018). This has propelled the government to impose island-wide state of emergency declaration for a few days, while shutting down social media networks. These incidents are symptomatic of a wider issue that has an undercurrent of racism and nationalism entrenched in the psyche of those Sinhala Buddhist hardliners as a result of 26-year-long civil war and post-war realities in the country.

It is interesting to examine the role of government and law enforcement agencies during the violence against Muslims in Ampara and Kandy. Thus, the following section extensively deals with such aspects.

### 5. Complicity of Government and Law Enforcement Authorities

Report suggests that the police and some local Buddhist politicians are complicit in the violence unleashed against Muslims in Kandy. CCTV footage fixed in Muslim business centers and mosques, and the evidence furnished by victims and witnesses reveals members of an elite paramilitary police unit abusing and assaulting Muslim clerics and worshippers when they were in the Mosque for prayers (Allard and Aneez 2018). Numerous eyewitnesses and survivors described the brutalities unleashed by the armed Special Task Force (STF) in uniform in vivid detail (Fernando 2018). Many people in Kandy believe the violence was well-organized with the knowledge of the government and police inaction has been as a major contributory factor in the whole episode of violence against Muslims as they were seen as passive onlookers at the mobs (Fernando and Wettimuny 2018). Thus, I argue that the law enforcement agencies have largely collude with the mobs during the violence in Kandy in a number of locations.

It is reported that a politician was believed to have involved in the violence in Ampara instigating the mobs against Muslims and he has had a discussion with top brass of police forces in Ampara prior to the violence began (Jeyaraj 2018b). All of these clearly indicate the complicity of state and law enforcement officials in the whole episode of violence against Muslims in Ampara as well as in Kandy.

Although transition of power took place in January 2015 with a new regime emerged in the political landscape promising to end impunity for attacks on Muslims, the government has commenced no proper investigations of past violence, and prosecuted no leaders of groups known to be involved in attacks on Muslims. Despite the mere rhetoric of politicians and other officials that the law will be strictly and equally enforced to all and those engaging in violence will be arrested, key organizers of the Ampara and Kandy violence still remain free. Needless to say, while government leaders have not apparently supported the mobs causing violence against Muslims, they appear hesitant taking action against the perpetrators, especially on those Buddhist monks because the government perceive antagonizing the Buddhist monks and prosecuting them will compromise their constituency. This is exactly why the government is reluctant to enforce law and order equally on all citizens, regardless of ethnicity and religion, and to bring all the perpetrators of violence to book. This has made them to turn a blind eye to violence unleashed against Muslims. Had the government and law enforcement agencies acted decisively beefing up the security in areas that were vulnerable to violence and arrested the key figures behind the hate speech and violence, much of what occurred in Ampara and Kandy could have been curbed.

Therefore, it is also interesting to examine why the violence against Muslims still persists under the current coalition government that consists of minority political parties. The following section extensively deals with the key factors that contributed to the violence in Ampara and Kandy.

## 6. Factors behind Anti-Muslim Violence in Ampara and Kandy

There are many factors behind the recent upsurge of violence against Sri Lankan Muslims, particularly in Ampara and Kandy. Many believe that it was an organized and targeted attack by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners who are well known (Keelan 2018).

The outcome of the recent local government election and the government's continuous failure to prosecute those who spread hate speech against Muslims could have emboldened the rioters and political monks, who led the campaign and violence. Moreover, various accounts suggest that there are some serious factors behind the upsurge of violence in Ampara and Kandy, which can be discussed in the following section.

### 6.1 Phobia of Growing Population of Muslims

Sinhala Buddhists hardliners hold the view that in the foreseeable future the Sri Lankan Muslims would become a major threat to the numerical majority of Sinhalese, given the unprecedented growth of Muslim population in the country. Although many scholars attempted to address this issue in a scientific way and allay such fears, Sinhala Buddhist hardliners exploit this myth to foment and aggravate anti-Muslim sentiments to achieve their own political, economic and social goals.

Some scholars observe that Sinhala Buddhist community is a 'majority with a minority complex' (Thambiah 1986). This existential fear of Sinhala Buddhists in the country is exacerbated with the perceived growth of Muslim population characterized as a potential threat to the numerical majority of Sinhala Buddhists. The Muslim population in Sri Lanka is perceived to have grown disproportionately compared to other ethno-religious groups, thereby presenting a numerical threat to the demographic dominance of the Sinhala-Buddhist community (Wettimuny 2018). It is alleged that the Muslims were 7.5% of the total population in 1981, however, in 2012, their population growth reached to 9.3%, whereas Sinhalese were 73.9% in 1981 and their population growth reached to 74.9% in 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka 2012). This shows population of Sinhalese has increased by 1 % while the population of Muslims increased by 1.8%. This has apparently contributed to the paranoia of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners about Muslim population and persuaded them to believe that Sri Lanka could become a Muslim majority country in the long run. I argue that this view of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners is myopic and shows their minority complex, though they are the majority. This can also be debunked based on the size of gap between the numbers of Sinhalese and Muslims from 1981 to 2012 given in the following table.

Table 4. Size of population gap between Sinhalese and Muslims

Census Year	Buddhists	Muslims	Gap
1881	1,698,100	197,800	1,500,300
1946	4,294,900	436,600	3,858,300
2001	12,286,600	1,435,900	10,850,700
2011	14,222,844	1,967,227	12,255,617

(Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka 2012)

The size of the gap between the two population, Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka, appears to be steadily increasing from 1881. If so, one does not need to be a rocket scientist to arrive at a conclusion that Muslims will never be able to exceed the number of Buddhists in the foreseeable future in Sri Lanka. While the national average population growth remains 1.2%, Muslim population has increased by only 1.8 % over the years, which is reasonable and cannot be framed as a threat to the numerical majority of Sinhala Buddhist population in the country in future. A scholarly account on the past and future scenarios of population growth of Sinhalese and Muslims concludes that Muslim community no way poses a credible threat to the numerical majority of Sinhala Buddhists in the country in terms of population growth (Batcha 2017).

It should be noted that the alleged narrative of *wanda pethi* (sterilization pills) exploited by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners to incite violence against Muslims in Ampara has a direct nexus to population growth of Sinhalese. However, the statistics of growing Muslim population and decline of Buddhist population are largely disputed. The ‘news’ about a rapid decline in Sinhala-Buddhist numbers is fake news to make Sinhala-Buddhists feel insecure (Gunasekara 2018). However, the fact that the growing Muslim population, according to the view of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners, will exceed them in times to come has deeply entrenched in the psyche of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists. This, in turn, propels them to adopt violence as a means of assuaging their existential fear of becoming a minority. Such violence has emerged as a ‘fundamental desire of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist imagination’ (Dewasiri 2016). Thus, until this fear factor is legitimately countered in a convincing manner among the Sinhalese, the suspicion and hatred against Muslims coupled with violence are likely to persist in the country.

### 6.2 Myth of Sterilization Pills (*Wanda pethi*)

Narrative of mixing ‘sterilization pills’ (*wanda pethi*) in the food items served in the Muslim-owned eatery is attributed to the violence perpetrated against Muslims in Ampara. The argument put forth by the instigators that Muslims were conspiring to de-populate the Sinhalese by mixing sterilization pills. This argument has a dimension of population growth of Sinhalese. Although this allegation seems ludicrous, this is exactly the reason attributed to the outbreak of violence in Ampara. However, it is medically and scientifically proven that the allegation of sterilization pills is absurd and ridiculous since it is not possible to prevent “babies forming in wombs” through administering contraceptive drugs in food particularly in *rotti* or meat curry. It is also not possible to weaken sperm by mixing drugs in food as any drug would lose potency when being heated to a high degree on a stove or cooker. Thus, this myth has explicitly been debunked by a group of medical professionals in Sri Lanka citing there has been no easily available drug in the Western medical practice, which can significantly affect infertility (*Daily Mirror* 2018). The World Health Organization in Sri Lanka (2018) also refuted the claim of sterilization pills suggesting that there is no medication or a pill currently available that can permanently make a human being sterile. I argue that if such contraceptive pills were invented in Sri Lanka to make one an infertile, the country would have economically been prosperous with such new invention by exporting it to the most populated countries like China and India in the world. Sadly, such canard has been believed by large numbers of Sinhalese (Jeyaraj 2018a). Thus, it seems clear that allegation of *wanda pethi* served as a trigger and an excuse to unleash violence against Muslims in Ampara town, targeting their economic establishments and a place of worship-mosque. Thus, it can be observed that the primary objective of violence was to destroy the economic power of Muslims in Ampara town such as their owned businesses, shops, houses and vehicles. The secondary objective was to deliver a symbolic message or threat to the Muslims that the existence of their religious place-Mosque in the Ampara town cannot be tolerated and thus Mosques were attacked. By and large, the violence was accompanied by a well-organized hate campaign against Muslims on the basis of canards and false propaganda.

### 6.3 Economic Rivalry and Jealousy

As highlighted in the section on Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, fierce competition of Muslims with Sinhalese in the economic sector led to ethnic hostilities, which ultimately culminated as anti-Muslim violence in Gampola in 1915, Puttalam in 1976, Mawanella in 2000s, and Aluthgama in 2014. Criticism of Muslims becoming economically stronger and attaining benefits through unfair means has particular resonance with Sinhalese facing economic difficulties, as the government struggles to control the cost of living and provide sustainable livelihoods, especially in rural areas and small towns. Narrative of increasing presence of Muslims in the economic sector, jeopardizing the economic interest of Sinhalese is consistently exploited by the Sinhala Buddhist hardliners among the mainstream Buddhists with the support of Sinhala traders whose interest is to weaken the dominance of Muslims in the economic sector. These rivalries and jealousy play out at the local level with regular appeals to Sinhala Buddhist consumers to boycott Muslim shops, and with rioting that regularly targets Muslim-owned businesses. It is widely believed that Sinhala business leaders are funders of Bodu Bala Sena and other Sinhala Buddhist hardliners (Keelan 2018).

Although Kandy violence was triggered by a traffic dispute between a Sinhalese truck driver and four Muslim men, it led to a despicable violence causing enormous damage to the properties, mosques, houses and vehicles of Muslims. Maheson Balagaya, which is one of the Sinhala Buddhist hardline elements, was believed to be behind the violence in Kandy. I argue that if those who mourned the death of truck driver including the mobs of Maheson Balagaya were really concerned about the truck driver's family, they could have negotiated with Muslim leaders in the area to claim a reasonable amount as compensation to the bereaved family or could have stoked violence in retribution on the day the incident occurred, that is, February 22nd. However, the way in which violence was unleashed on February 4th, after almost two weeks the moment the victim died, and systematic attacks were perpetrated on selected Muslim shops and houses in Digana and Teldeniya areas thereafter suggests that this was explicitly well-orchestrated targeting the Muslim economy in Kandy area.

Many of the Muslims first came to Sri Lanka as traders from the Middle East and other regions and they have been traders traditionally. Thus, they naturally have an edge in the market place. Moreover, while economic liberalization helped boost the commercial activities of Muslims, it worsened the economic strength of Sinhalese in terms of competition with Muslim traders in the market economy (Keethaponcalan 2018). This could also be attributed to violence unleashed in Kandy against Muslim commercial establishments like their shops and industries which were razed to the ground.

Nevertheless, narrative of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners that the perceived Muslims' economic success is a threat to Sinhala-Buddhist economic dominance is naïve and untenable. Scapegoating of economically successful minorities, at times the country faces economic instability, to the ills of Sinhala Buddhist economy is unhealthy for a sustainable growth of developing countries like Sri Lanka. As such, Wettamuny (2018) equates Muslims with the fate of Jews in Nazi Germany where during the Weimar Era, Jews were widely resented in Nazi Germany for their economic strength, and for being relatively unscathed by the impacts of the financial crisis that rocked Germany between 1929 and 1933 (Wettimuny 2018). Thus, needless to say, the key factor behind the Ampara and Kandy violence was the economic dimension of Muslims. Nevertheless, some scholars have disputed the popular thesis of strong economic strength of Muslims. An account of Izeth Hussein argues that the specially privileged economic position of the Muslims was a myth and that the economic positions of all the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka were more or less the same. He further argues that the claim Muslims possessing inordinate wealth compared to other ethnic group is purposely advanced by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners to marginalize and target their economic prosperity (Hussein 2017). A report of National Shoor Council also debunks the thesis that Muslims are economically prosperous. Their analysis reveals while the national poverty index remains at 6.7 percent, the poverty of Muslims living in sub-urban and rural areas remains at 21 percent, which is three times higher than that of national index. It also reveals that the income level of 210,000 families (60%) out of 350,000 total Muslim families remains below national average income of the country (Ajwardeen 2015). This shows that Muslims are not economically prosperous as propagated by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners.

Apart from the above factors attributed to the Ampara and Kandy violence, it appears that there are some sub-factors that have significantly contributed to the anti-Muslim sentiment leading to violence against Muslims in the country in recent times. Such factors are discussed in the following section.

#### 6.4 *Islamophobia*

Many Sinhalese have deeply rooted fears that the Sinhala and Buddhist character of the island is under threat and would be taken over by Muslims as happened in the case of other countries in the past and thus it must be protected from aliens like Muslims. This is equated with Mahavamsa<sup>10</sup> mentality that has dominated the consciousness of the Sinhalese majority and such mentality prompts the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists to perceive an entitlement complex that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country and that Sinhala Buddhists are divinely protected at the request of the Buddha himself (Gunathilleke 2018). As such, I argue that the ethno-religious violence against the Muslims perpetrated by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners is justified.

Sinhala Buddhists hold the view that there has been a process of radicalization within the Sri Lankan Muslim community in the recent times. Umma consciousness (unity among Muslims) espoused by ultra-religious orthodoxy like Tabligh Jamath and Saudi-backed Thowheed Jamath(TJ) has endangered indigenous culture and integration of the country (Ali 2004). I maintain that these practices have spurred many Muslims to adopt ritualist Islamic practices and Arab culture in the form of dress, rituals and so on, which apparently contributed to the hostility of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners towards Muslims.

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<sup>10</sup> Mahavamsa is known as the ancient Great Chronicle composed of the historical narration of Buddhism's ascendance in Sri Lanka and establishment civilization of Sinhalese in the island.

### *6.5 Formation of Ethnic Political Party for Muslims*

It is argued that the formation of an ethnic political party for Muslims, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), was not only a historical blunder but has seriously jeopardized the security of Muslims living across the country (Ali 2004). Thus, SLMC becoming a key decision maker (king maker) in the mainstream politics has also contributed to the hostility of Sinhala Buddhist nationalists against Muslims.

### *6.6 Exceptionalism to Buddhist Clergies*

The Buddhist monks are highly respected by the mainstream Buddhists in Sri Lanka and thus their actions are tolerated because of the saffron robe that represents Buddha and dhamma(doctrine).Moreover, Buddhist monks commanded an exceptional treatment and enjoyed the culture of impunity to the extent of being pardoned despite having shot dead former Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike (Jeyaraj 2009). Similarly, both Ampitiya Sumanarathna Thero, the chief incumbent monk of Batticaloa Temple, and BBS General Secretary, Galogoda Atte Gnanasara Thero have enjoyed exceptional impunity, even though they abused and assaulted the government servants and evaded arrests for several days. As such, I argue that the political leaders enforce exceptionalism to Buddhist monks even to the extent of enabling them to enjoy a culture of impunity though they commit violence against ethno-religious minorities. It is widely believed both monks were partly behind the Kandy violence against Muslims, however, no action has been taken so far against them. This underscores the overt exceptionalism provided to Buddhist monks in the country.

The preceding subsection discusses the key contributing factors of Ampara and Kandy violence against Muslims along with some other sub-factors that have somehow contributed to the violence. Moreover, some scholars maintain that the current wave of attacks by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners is designed in part to provoke a violent response from Muslims, which would then be used to justify wider-scale attacks on the community (Keelan 2018). This is partly true because when a community is subjected to persistent violence with or without the patronage of law enforcement agencies, they are naturally bound to react with full force. Such reaction in the form of physical or non-physical violence could be justified for a wide range attacks against the Muslims living across the country. Fortunately, Muslim community in the face of such provocation exercised remarkable restraint.

It is also common knowledge that Muslims have become a new enemy in the post war scenario in the perspective of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists, which conflate religion with territory and language. Sadly, the rise of Islamization provided a convenient handle to demonize the community and unleash violence against Muslims in the country.

It is worth mentioning that the violence in Ampara and Kandy marked the resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist hardliners, precisely because the mobs or militants apparently emboldened by the present government's failure to prosecute those responsible for hate speech and violence against minorities and to equally apply law and order on all citizens.

## **7. Conclusions**

Is Sri Lanka re-entering into a dark age with the renewed violence centered around religious allegory. This is the core of the above discussion. As Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, extremism may cause greater damage to the co-existence of communities. Extremism is such a dangerous trend that it can set the country on fire and endanger innocent lives.

As seen above, violence against Muslims in Ampara and Kandy perpetrated by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners caused irreparable damages. The violence against Muslims in Ampara and Kandy is attributed to phobia against the growing Muslim population, myth of sterilization pills served in the Muslims business establishments, and economic rivalry and jealousy between Muslims and Sinhalese with some other sub-factors contributed to the same. More importantly, the article shows complicity of law enforcement agencies and government with mobs in the violence because the government fears apprehending those Sinhala Buddhist hardliners will compromise the political survival or constituency.

Much of what had occurred in Ampara and Kandy could have been either curbed or contained, had the government and law enforcement actors acted swiftly arresting the key figures behind the hate speech and violence. However, the continued failure of the government to arrest key Buddhist hardliners or instigators of recent attacks is not only appalling, but has also emboldened radical nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena, Ravana Balaya, Sinhala Ravaya and Mahason Balagaya to incite more ethno-religious violence against minorities, particularly the Muslims. Therefore, it is important to enforce the law against hate speech and intolerance propagated in the name of religion or ethnicity and prosecute offenders. Zero-tolerance policy towards perpetrators of violence, whoever they are, must be adopted. The government should proscribe all hardline elements, regardless of ethnicity or

religion, in the country that propagate hate, lies and suspicion about an ethnic group among the psyche of youth in particular and the people in general. It is vital that all persons including Buddhist monks, who have caused and incited violence in Ampara and Kandy must be immediately prosecuted. Thus, there is a need of better managing human and social security of all groups, especially religious and ethnic minorities.

More importantly, the government must work to actively correct the lies and disinformation about Muslims such as phobia of their population, false narrative of sterilization pills, myth of Islamization and so forth spread by Sinhala Buddhist hardliners in various spaces including social media.

Constant dialogues between Sinhala Buddhist religious leaders and the Muslim religious leaders/political leadership should be held regularly, particularly when a problem or misunderstanding surfaces between ethnic groups. Civil society groups must be formed comprising of cross-ethnic representatives/civil society activists in certain volatile areas so that they could counter the myth propagated in the name of religion or ethnicity. Professionals like doctors, engineers, lawyers representing all ethnic groups can engage in constructive discussions about issues confronting their communities to ensure that they can proactively work to stymie violence.

Riot police unit/force consisting of armed forces representing all ethnic groups should be constituted and mobilized in times of crisis, so that the police and forces will be impartial and enforce law and order equally on all citizens, regardless of religious and ethnic differences. Sinhala language as a compulsory subject in a Tamil medium school and vice versa should be introduced from the elementary level of education as soon as possible. Comparative religion and pluralism plus cultural diversity as a treasure of the nation should be taught at schools from elementary level of education to tertiary level. More importantly, Sri Lanka needs to evolve into a strong secular-state while actively promoting a pluralist vision for sustainable peace and development of the country.

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