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# Contents

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| BBS | Bodu Bala Sena |
| CVF | Civil Volunteer Force |
| EPRLF | Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front |
| EROS | Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students |
| ESLMUF | East Sri Lanka Muslim United Front |
| GoSL | Government of Sri Lanka |
| IDP | Internally Displaced Person |
| IPKF | Indian Peace Keeping Force |
| JHU | Jathika Hela Urumaya |
| JVP | Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna |
| LTTE | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam |
| MEP | Mahajana Eksath Peramuna |
| MULF | Muslim United Liberation Front |
| MSGR | Muslim Self-Governing Region |
| NUA | National United Alliance |
| PA | People's Alliance |
| PLOTE | People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam |
| SLFP | Sri Lanka Freedom Party |
| SLMC | Sri Lanka Muslim Congress |
| TELO | Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization |
| TNA | Tamil National Alliance |
| TULF | Tamil United Liberation Front |
| UNF | United National Front |
| UNP | United National Party |
| UPFA | United People's Freedom Alliances |

# Chapter 1
# Introduction


**Abstract** This chapter introduces the main purpose of this book. It also gives the historical background of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. It explains the diversity within the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and how Muslims started to identify themselves as Moors. This chapter also gives an introduction to pre-colonial times and colonial times in Sri Lanka. From the perspective of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, this chapter also gives the reader an introduction to the civil war and post-war conflicts involving the Sri Lankan community. This chapter also has an introduction to the political party that this book analyzes, namely, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress. In this chapter the reader will also get an introduction to some or the theoretical points of departure in this book. The chapter ends by discussing the source material upon which this study is based as well as how it is analyzed. The three types of sources are: interviews, parliamentary speeches, and official documents from the SLMC. They will be analyzed separately in the following chapters and will then be compared in the final chapter. The different forms of source material not only give a widespread empirical base but also correspond to the overall aim and questions posed by me in this book.

**Keywords** Muslim politics · Islam · Muslims · Sri Lanka · Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

> OK, I don't quote the Qur'an and the Sunna, but occasionally I refer to the Qur'an and various other things […] I am careful in a multiethnic society, that even Mr. Ashraff in the latter part of his political career, even attempted to rebrand the SLMC, under a new […] name, which has its own rationale. He founded the National Unity Alliance […] We had a discussion on reinventing the idea so we don't impose the Muslim element or the Muslim factor, and to rebrand in such a way that it would be more acceptable and also attract the non-Muslims to the political movement, and we will try to be a little more diverse in our composition.[1]

This book investigates the use of religious terms and symbols in politics. More specifically, it investigates Muslim politics. When scholars of Islamic Studies and the

[1] Rauff Hakeem, 2013-02-24.



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study of religion research Muslim political parties, they generally focus on Islamist or post-Islamist politics, even though the world of Muslim politics is much wider. When political scientists analyze political parties, religious features are often brushed aside even though they are presented as crucial by the parties themselves. Many books and articles about Muslim political parties consequently deal superficially with Islamic terminology and its meaning. The aim of this book is therefore to analyze the role of religious terms and symbols within a non-fundamentalist political party, namely, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), a Muslim political party that has been part of the democratic process in Sri Lanka since the 1980s. Thereby, I hope to broaden the research on political parties founded on religious ideologies.

There exist several important academic studies that focus on ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Many, however, mention Muslims only in passing.[2] One reason is most probably that Muslims did not participate in the civil war as an organized group. Muslim Sri Lankans were, however, clearly affected by the conflict and were even directly targeted by non-Muslim Tamil and Sinhalese activists.[3] There are furthermore a few other studies that concern the rise of SLMC, but they do not address the issue of religion.[4]

This book analyzes the official documents and parliamentary speeches (1989–1992 and 2006–2011) of the SLMC, as well as interviews conducted with SLMC High Command, which is the highest decision-making body in the SLMC.[5]

This book is organized around the key argument that the SLMC's use of religious terms and symbols has been pragmatic and changed depending on context and a shifting political landscape. More specifically, the book presents two main findings. The use of religious symbols and terms in the SLMC differs in internal party documents (such as member guidelines) from publically visible documents (such as parliamentary speeches and public posters). In internal party documents, Islamic symbols and terms are used to delimit Muslims as a specific group in the political context of post-colonial Sri Lanka. In public documents, on the other hand, we see a significant historical change. Between 1989 and 1992 these documents reveal a use of Islamic terms and symbols as parts of solutions to social problems. Such a use changed following the post-9/11 anti-Muslim that emerged across the globe. The SLMC responded by more or less refraining from using Islamic terms and symbols in parliament, and using inclusive terms to attract non-practicing Muslims and differentiating itself from openly Islamist parties and movements. The quote above, which is a statement from SLMC party leader Rauff Hakeem, captures precisely this

[2] For some examples, see Wickramasinghe 2006, Warnapala 2001, and Meyer 2001.

[3] For example, see Abdullah 2004, Ali 2004, 2014, Brune 2003, De Munk 2005a, b, Gaasbeek 2010, Haniffa 2013, Imtiyaz, 2005, 2009, Imtiyaz and Iqbal 2011, Mahroof 1990, McGilvray 1974, 1991, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2011b, 2014, Mohan 1987, Shukri 1986, Walker 2013, Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam 2003, and Klem 2011.

[4] For examples, see Alif 2012, Gosh 2003: 237–242, and De Silva 1998: 251–271.

[5] The fieldwork upon which this book is based was concluded in 2013, and the political narrative concludes with the election of 2012.

major change. However, even though the SLMC's symbolic politics exhibit these different uses and changes, there is also a continuity: both the internal and public documents are clearly premised on an essentialist idea that Sri Lankan Muslims are a distinct race that share a religion because, they claim, they are descendants of Arab merchants who arrived in the seventh century.

It is understandable from a strategic point of view that the SLMC would change its rhetoric so as not to be framed as Islamists in a country where Muslims are a minority and where suspicions of political Islam exist, and spread wider after 9/11. However, this strategy has not fully succeeded in rebranding the SLMC as an inclusive and multiethnic party in the eyes of their political opponents and public discourse, where an ethnic Muslim label is used to describe the SLMC's identity and politics.

## Historical Background

Overviews of the communities in Sri Lanka generally categorize its inhabitants as Sinhalese, Tamil, or Muslim. Although this categorization is a simplification, it is a useful beginning. The majority population of Sri Lanka consider themselves to be Sinhalese and are predominantly Buddhist (74%). The major minority groups are Tamils, who are predominantly Hindu (15%), and Muslims, who then are categorized solely by religious affiliation (9.7%).[6] The thorny issue of the categorization of the population will be addressed below (Illustration 1.1).

### *Pre-Colonial and Colonial Times*

The origins of Sri Lanka's Muslim community may be traced back to the trade that occurred between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Traders from the Middle East (that is, Arabs and Persians) first had commercial interests in the south of India in the seventh century, and this interest also spread to Sri Lanka.[7] The merchants from the Middle East married Tamil and Sinhalese women and settled in the

[6] See McGilvray 2015. Christians can also be counted among the Sinhalese and Tamil populations (7.4%). There are also other minorities in the country, such as the Vedda people and burghers, who are self-identifying communities. See McGilvray 2008: 47–49, 174–175, 181–182. For a detailed table of the Muslim population in each province, see Ameerdeen 2006: 29. Muslims are traditionally seen as traders, although most Muslims work in the service industry or in agriculture. In the east, Muslims are farmers and fishermen and own 50% of the paddy land in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts. For more information about the legislative council, see Ameerdeen 2006: 62f, and for a detailed table of information regarding current Muslim employment, see Ameerdeen 2006: 53.

[7] Shukri 1986: 337 and McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 4.

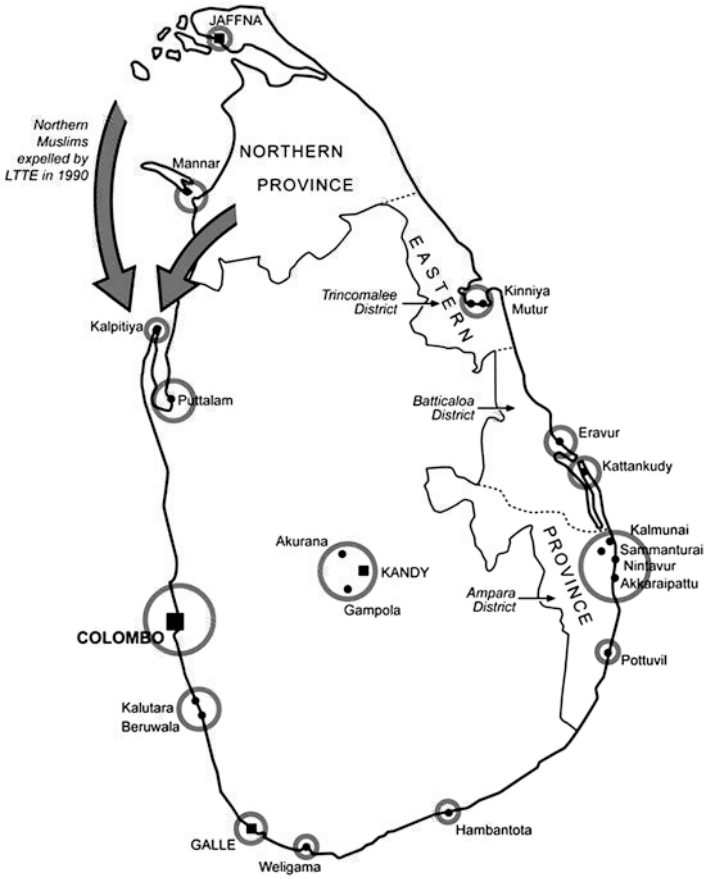


**Illustration 1.1** Map of important sites for the Muslim population of Sri Lanka. (Published with the permission from the authors McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 5)

east around the area of Batticaloa and Ampara.[8] Most of the Muslims in Sri Lanka have Tamil as their mother tongue and display clear traits of Tamil culture and, to some degree, Tamil social structure: "the Sri Lankan Muslims also preserve matrilineal and matrilocal family patterns" that have "shaped Tamil social structure".[9] The Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms in Sri Lanka allowed the Muslims to continue trading, and soon these kingdoms assumed a powerful role as an international trading community.[10]

In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese colonized the island, which they controlled from 1502 until 1638. At this time, Muslim inhabitants dominated the

[8] For more detailed information about Arab/Persian history in Sri Lanka, see Dewaraja 1994.

[9] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 5.

[10] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 4.

trading business, both internationally and within Sri Lanka. The Portuguese strove to end Muslim domination in this area because of their trading ambitions.[11] Though the Portuguese did not manage to monopolize the trading, the colonizers put restrictions on indigenous groups, including Muslim traders.[12] Muslims hence lost their dominant trading position, and the main reason for it was their inability to respond to the Portuguese naval power. This weakness was also one of the key factors that enabled other European powers, especially the Dutch and the British, to further encroach upon areas like trade that previously had been in the hands of Muslims.[13]

The European powers brought Christianity to Sri Lanka and established Christian institutions.[14] The Portuguese used the term "Moor" for the Muslims of the island (as they did for other Muslim communities they encountered throughout the world).[15] As a consequence, a local "Moorish" identity was established. Stories about Arabic merchants settling down in Sri Lanka "became the official rationale for treating 'Moors' as 'racially' distinct from Tamils in late nineteenth century colonial sociology".[16] The Moorish label developed into a self-definition for Muslims in Sri Lanka in the early twentieth century, beginning with the elite, who promoted it as a unique racial identity which they labeled "Ceylon Moors". The Ceylon Moor identity referred to those with a presumed Arab origin, which distinguished them mainly from the local Tamils.[17] In the history of the political identification of Muslims, some of the Muslim political leaders emphasized a difference between Ceylon Moors and Coast Moors, arguing that the Ceylon Moors had Arabic ancestors and that the Coast Moors were of Indian origin.[18] Muslim political leaders have continued to promote a "Moorish" identity, with the focus on a collective Arab "blood connection", pointing out that Muslims are not bound to any specific language (even though most of them speak Tamil).[19] This is very important in the case of Sri Lanka compared to that of Muslims in Tamil Nadu, who sees themselves as Tamils who adhere to the Islamic faith.

After the Portuguese, the Dutch, who held power between 1638 and 1796, began to colonize the island. The new colonizers treated Muslim inhabitants as the Portuguese had done, which forced Muslims to move from the east coast to other places in the country. Local Sinhalese kings assisted in these resettlements.[20]

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[11] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 6.

[12] De Silva, C.R. 1986: 159.

[13] De Silva, C.R. 1986: 160.

[14] See Mahroof 1990.

[15] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 9.

[16] Spencer 2014: 4.

[17] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 9.

[18] O'Sullivan 1999a: 57. Like the Muslims, the Tamil community has also been constructed throughout history. For a discussion on how the Tamil identity was constructed and how it included Muslims, see O'Sullivan 1999a: 150f. A detailed discussion of the cultural and linguistic affinities of the Sri Lankan Muslims can be found in McGilvray 1998 and McGilvray 2016.

[19] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 10.

[20] Nuhman 2002: 33.

Muslims now had to turn to new occupations besides trade, such as fishing and weaving, and were accepted in Sinhalese kingdoms.[21] With the Dutch came a new group of Muslims to the island, the Malays, who had their own distinct language and culture.[22]

Later, the British came to power in Sri Lanka in 1796 and ruled until 1948. Muslims once again found themselves in a new situation because the trade policy of the British towards the Muslims differed from that of earlier colonizers. The British were more tolerant of Muslims' involvement in trade.[23] Muslims also became more active in politics as a distinct group. They established, for example, Shari'a courts. Most of the Muslims in Sri Lanka today belong to the Shafi'i school of law, *madhhab,* as did the first Muslims who came to the island.[24] As will be discussed below, from 1880 onwards there were Muslim representatives in the all-island council, which meant that Muslims had a political voice. It has been argued that it was the British who helped Muslims to formulate their own identity.[25]

Under British rule (1796–1948), there were also several new Muslim newspapers published. They reported on events occurring in the Muslim world at large. These newspapers were moreover printed in various languages, for example, Arabic Tamil (Tamil written in Arabic script).[26] A common religious identity was shaped at this point by the Muslim elite. The narratives of the Muslim elite regarding the history of Muslims are rather focused on the Arabic (male) merchants, and not the Persians who also arrived in the country at that time. Women were mostly excluded: "It would appear that Arab men gave birth, by themselves, to the Sri Lankan Muslim social formation".[27] Not only was Arabic heritage important, but some also emphasized that these early Muslims descended from the *Banu Hashim*, the clan of the prophet Muhammad.[28]

The first legislative council, which was instituted by the British, was held in 1833 and in it a Tamil-speaking member represented the Muslims. That a Hindu represented Muslims prompted the Muslim political elite to demand their own representative, and it took them over 50 years to succeed in achieving this goal.[29] In the 1880s a Muslim politician claimed that Tamils and Muslims are separate groups and should be treated as equals, for example, regarding the recognition of their own

[21] Goonewardena 1986: 225.

[22] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 6. It is possible that the Malay culture has a longer history in Sri Lanka; for an introduction to the Malay language and history in Sri Lanka, see Mahroof 1992. For an "insider's" narrative of being Malay in Sri Lanka, see Saldin 2003.

[23] Ali 1986: 236.

[24] There is also the practice of the Hanafi School in Sri Lanka. For an introduction to the different Sunni schools of law, see Hallaq: 1997.

[25] O'Sullivan 1999a: 50.

[26] Arabic Tamil is not recognized by the state. See Ahmad 2012: 276.

[27] Ismail 1995: 75. The focus on Arab merchants is still current. For an example, see Hussein 2011.

[28] Ismail 1995: 65.

[29] Ameerdeen 2006: 61.

laws.[30] A Muslim identity was formally institutionalized when a Muslim member was elected into the legislative council in 1889.[31] The British, in a "crucial sense, thus helped 'create' a Muslim identity".[32]

In 1887 an event that contributed further to the establishment of Tamil and Muslim as distinct emic groups, despite the fact that most Muslims spoke Tamil, was a famous speech made by the politician Ponnambalam Ramanathan in which he stated "that the Moors were simply Muslim members of the Tamil 'race'" because both had the Tamil language in common.[33] This classification of Muslims as Tamils affected, among other things, the area of education. In Tamil-dominated areas, there were only Hindu and Christian schools.[34] The lack of Muslim schools led to a boycott in the early 1900s by Muslim inhabitants, and the education level among Muslim youths dropped as a result. The matter of Muslims schools started to gain more attention. Later, Muslim schools and Islamic schools flourished, and the first school for Muslim girls was started.[35]

Another incident that symbolizes the strengthening of a Muslim identity at this time was "the fez cap incident", which took place in 1905.[36] It occurred when a chief justice of the Supreme Court objected to the wearing of fezzes in court, which resulted in massive demonstrations that spread around the island.[37] One of the explanations for why the Muslim elite started to wear fezzes is attributed to Arabi Pasha, an Egyptian in exile and a person who inspired Muslim activists throughout the country at this time.[38]

Later in the 1900s, another incident would further the notion of Muslims as a group distinct from other groups. In 1915, riots, or, as some would like to call it, organized violence, took place in Sri Lanka between Sinhala Buddhists and Muslim communities.[39] The riots began with events that took place in connection with the Vesak festival, when police changed the original route of the celebrating Buddhists in order to prevent them from passing a mosque. In combination with the mockery from Muslims, this sparked violence between the two communities in various parts of the country.[40] Twenty-five Muslims were killed, around 200 were injured, Muslim women were raped, 17 mosques were damaged, and many businesses belonging to Muslims were destroyed.[41] According to political scientist Meghan O'Sullivan, certain Sinhala politicians started to express anti-Muslim statements, claiming that

[30] Uyangoda 2001: 120.
[31] Haniffa 2013: 175.
[32] Ismail 1995: 74.
[33] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 9.
[34] Wimalratne 1986: 428.
[35] O'Sullivan 1999a: 53.
[36] Ahmad 2012: 277.
[37] Ahmad 2012: 277.
[38] Ismail 1995: 73.
[39] Ismail 1995: 86.
[40] O'Sullivan 1999a: 60.
[41] O'Sullivan 1999a: 60.

Muslims were not Sri Lankans and stating that these two communities never could get along.[42] However, the event did bring the British and the Muslims closer together. As a result, the Sinhalese anti-colonization movement came to consider Muslims to be loyal supporters of the British.[43]

From an outside perspective, the Sri Lankan Muslims of today do not constitute a homogenous group language-wise, culturally, or even denominationally. They belong to different subgroups, such as Sri Lankan Moors, Malays, Bohras, and Memons.[44] The majority are Sunni even though the Bohras, for example, are a part of a Shi'a (Ismaili) tradition. The Sunni-Shi'a divide is, however, not of major importance in Sri Lanka.[45] The greatest concentration of Muslims is to be found in the eastern part of the country.[46] As pointed out earlier, the majority of Tamils are Hindus. In some other countries, such as India, the Tamil cultural and social connections have led to divisions among Muslims in a caste-like fashion; this caste-like division does not occur among Tamil-speaking Muslims in Sri Lanka, however.[47]

The Ampara district has the highest concentration of Muslims, that is, around 42%. The east coast Muslims represent one-third of the country's Muslim population. A large number of the remaining two-thirds lives on the southwestern coast of the country. These are Sinhalese-dominated areas, including the largest city, Colombo.[48]

## *The Origins of the Civil War*

Before introducing the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Muslim political activism, it is necessary to introduce some organizations and events in relation to the civil war. These events and organizations are crucial for understanding the context of the SLMC. After the British left (1948), the United National Party (UNP) dominated the Sri Lankan government (GoSL) in the first election. The UNP had a nationalistic agenda that was inclusive towards all of the island's different communities. The first Prime Minister, D.S. Senanayake, emphasized the common interests of the island's various groups. The GoSL had as its basis an acceptance of a pluralistic society mirroring the reality of the island and sought the reconciliation of the legitimate

[42] O'Sullivan 1999a: 62 and Ismail 1995: 87.

[43] De Silva K.M. 1986: 457.

[44] Bohras, Memons, and Afghans came to the island at the end of the nineteenth century. Afghans are considered to be fully integrated through intermarriage. For more details, see O'Sullivan 1999a.

[45] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 12.

[46] For an overview of the demographic changes of the Muslim population (1881–1981), see Marga Institute 1988.

[47] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 7. For a detailed overview of the history of Muslims in Tamil Nadu, see More 2004.

[48] McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 7.

interests of the majority and minorities within the context of an all-island policy.[49] This pluralistic view of nationalism seemed to be a viable alternative to ideas about narrower communalism that were beginning to develop in the country. One important group, led by Buddhist monks, expressed that it felt left out of this political process. Anthropologist Jonathan Spencer states that: "from the early 1940s on, […] one vociferous group of Buddhist monks had been calling for the right to participate in national politics".[50] According to Buddhist activists, the UNP was unsympathetic to the religious, linguistic, and cultural ideals of Buddhism, and this neglect of Buddhism was one of the reasons why the elections of 1956 had a different outcome than the elections immediately after independence.[51]

In the election of 1956, Solomon Bandaranaike of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) became prime minister, and a new Sinhala nationalistic era began. The "Sinhala only" project then started, a project which sought to make Sinhalese the only official language.[52] It had a linguistic nationalist agenda and was a reaction to the colonial era from which the Sinhalese-oriented groups wanted to distance themselves.[53] There were other focal points in the project as well: the new government emphasized the uniqueness of the Sinhalese past and focused on Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhalese and the country in which Buddhism in its purest form was to be found.[54] As the majority of the Tamil population were, and still are, Hindu, the reaction from the Tamil part of the country was massive and protests erupted.[55]

During the first years of the post-colonial era, issues dear to the Muslim population were completely neglected by Sinhalese governance. This state of affairs led to clashes between Sinhalese groups, and groups formed around a common Muslim identity in the 1970s.[56]

In the 1970s, Tamil separatists started to emerge, and these separatists went on a collision course with the GoSL. The two major points of disagreement were language and religion. The disagreement began with the formulation of a new constitution in 1972, which stated that: "Accordingly it shall be the duty of the state to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights secured […]".[57] This new constitution additionally changed the name of the country from Ceylon to Sri Lanka. In doing so, the ruling government tried to distance itself from its colonial heritage.[58]

[49] De Silva K.M. 2005: 609.

[50] Spencer 2012: 727.

[51] De Silva K.M. 2005: 627.

[52] De Silva K.M. 2005: 628.

[53] De Silva K.M. 2005: 629.

[54] De Silva K.M. 2005: 673.

[55] Tamils are of course not a homogenous group; there are differences in caste, nation (Sri Lankan, Indian), religion (Christian, Hindu), region (east, north), politics, and class; see Wilson 2000: 23. For more details about Muslims' interactions with the Tamils, see McGilvray 2008.

[56] De Silva K.M. 2005: 628.

[57] De Silva K.M. 2005: 674.

[58] Spencer 2012: 727.