



Research Article

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Post-War Religious Violence, Counter-State Response and Religious Harmony in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lankan military forces and government authorities have succeeded to counter measure terrorism by defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, their initiatives and efforts to restore peace and harmony among different ethno-religious groups in the post-war context are highly complex. The additional space given to the reemergence of radical religious groups has negatively influenced the process of fostering religious tolerance and harmony, which have been maintained for centuries in the country. Ethno-religious minorities became the major targets of religious hatred and violent attacks. At both the societal and political platforms, majoritarian religious sentiments and discourse have established a dominant presence in opposing the existence and practice of the religious fundamentals of minorities. This study has attempted to investigate the nature and impact of majoritarian religious violence in post-war Sri Lanka, as well as the efforts made by the government authorities to control them in order to foster religious tolerance and harmony in the country. This study argues that religious violence under the shadow of religious nationalism has been promoted by many forces as a mechanism by which to consolidate a majoritarian ethno-religious hegemony in the absence of competing ethnic-groups context in post-war Sri Lanka. In many ways, state apparatuses have failed to control religious violence, maintain religious tolerance and inter-religious harmony, particularly of accommodating minorities in nature. The study concludes that the continuous promotion of majoritarian religious hegemony through anti-minority religious hatred and violence would further promote religious intolerance and radicalism challenging the establishment of religious harmony in the country.

Keywords: Religious violence; religious nationalism; ethno-religious minorities; religious harmony; post-war reconciliation; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Religion plays an influential role in human life. The existence and influence of religious violence on daily life is also evident everywhere in the world. Particularly, in plural societal context, the increased gap in relationships among religious groups results in increased religious intolerance and radicalism. Sri Lanka has also been the site for religious violence particularly in the post-civil war context. The increased social and political space allowed to the radical religious groups and

movements that recalled Buddhist nationalism and hegemony has resulted in more anti-religious minority sentiments and violence. This negatively resulted in building religious tolerance and harmony in the post-war reconciliation process in the country. Muslims [and also Christians] were the major target of majoritarian religious nationalism and the intensified religious violence in this regard. Not only the practice of their religious norms and duties but also their religious fundamentals and beliefs became highly targeted. Their socio-economic activities were also violently targeted as part of the broader anti-minority religious sentiments and hatred campaigns.

Although the impact of religious radicalism and violence imposed by the Buddhist nationalist forces were obvious and gained the attention of human rights activists and forums both locally and internationally, the responses of the state apparatus to control or stop the violence and anti-minority campaigns particularly against Muslims were very much limited. Therefore, these campaigns and violence increased in different forms until the regime change in the early 2015 with the defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa from the office of the presidency. When the new government, the one thematically and popularly referred to as 'Government for Good Governance' was formed in early 2015, expectations and hopes increased among minorities that they would be saved from the religious hatred and violence of nationalist forces. Also, the regime changes in 2015 appeared to have led to a decrease in organized religious violence against religious minorities. However, the new regime too failed to express its commitment or initiate any long-term effort to control or manage religious violence as well as do justice to the affected parties. Therefore, the religious violence continued in different ways even under the well-propagated 'government for good governance.' Also, there remains a substantial gap in terms of legal action against perpetrators of religious violence as to ensure religious tolerance and harmony among different religious groups in society. This shows that the state actors continued to be complicit in violation of freedom of religions or religious belief against minorities in Sri Lanka (MRGI, 2016).

Given the above context, this study attempts to assess the nature of religious violence and their impact on religious minorities, as well as the extent of state response to control that violence or establish communal justice to the affected parties and to strengthen religious harmony in post-war Sri Lanka. In this paper, a special focus is given to examine religious violence targeting places of worship and teaching of Muslim community in the post-war context, as well as counter state responses to reconcile grievances and control the religiously motivated nationalist groups. The reason for this specific focus on the part of Muslims is obvious that they were the most targeted ethno-religious group in this regard and became the most vulnerable in terms of receiving protection and justice from the state when they were victimized by religious hatred and violence. Though Muslims have a long history of peaceful co-existence, collaborating in socio-economic and political affairs with the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority community, they have been seriously targeted by the Buddhist nationalist forces in the post-civil war context. This is a serious puzzle that warrants academic investigation. On the other hand, the continued increase of religious violence and the influence of religious forces in the societal context, and the continued neglect on the part of the state apparatus to positively respond to the increasing religious violence targeting religious minorities leads to the necessity to conduct an academic investigation on how they would impact on strengthening religious harmony in post-war reconciliation process—which is lacking in the existing pool of literature in Sri Lankan context.

2. Methodology

This study is conducted mainly based on the secondary data. These data are collected from difference sources such as academic journal articles, newspaper articles, reports published by research centers based on their studies, and different reliable internet sites. These sources have discussed the discourses on anti-minority religious sentiments and campaigns and recorded number of religious violent incidents staged by radical Buddhist nationalist forces in opposing the ethno-religious features of religious minorities, particularly of Muslims and Christians in Sri Lanka's post-war context. Additionally, they have also analyzed the motives of the anti-religious minority sentiments and violence instigated by radical Buddhist nationalist forces. The information gathered from the above sources on the themes of this study are analyzed, critically examined and reported

in this paper in the form of direct quotations, quotations of others, summaries, discussion and the authors' interpretative arguments, all of which support the arguments developed in this study.

In religious studies, the interpretive approach aims to provide methods for developing an understanding of different religious traditions that can be used by students of different schools to increase both knowledge and understanding. It sets out neither to promote nor to undermine religious beliefs (Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016). However, this approach helps in terms of understanding inter-religious thoughts and principles of religious tolerance. In this paper, we analyze the nature of religious violence promoted against religious minorities, particularly against Muslims, and the role and (in)effectiveness of state actors in controlling religious violence and restoring religious harmony in Sri Lanka in the post-civil war context.

3. Major Findings

This study has found that religious violence as part of the political culture of Sri Lanka evolved even before independence. Although constitutions in the post-independent era have adopted provisions and mechanisms to protect and promote the religious rights of all religious groups, religious violence continued to be promoted in different forms by different groups, and socio-political actors. The three decades-long civil war also had religious aspects and promoted violence against religious fundamentals of ethno-religious groups. It is worth noting that the post-civil war era highly and visibly witnessed the motivation of intensified anti-minority religious campaigns and violence, particularly targeting Muslim and Christian communities. The following thematic sub-topics present and discuss the major findings of this study.

3.1 Nature of Religious Freedom and Position of Religious Minorities in Sri Lanka

Although Sri Lanka is predominantly a Buddhist country, its society is plural in nature. From its early history, Sri Lankan society has been a plural in nature consisting of a Buddhist majority, and Hindu and Muslim minority religious groups. From the arrival of Western colonials, Christianity also introduced in Sri Lanka. According to the country's recent census (2012), Buddhists form 70.1 percent in the country's population while Hindus form 12.6 percent, Islamic followers (Muslims) comprise 9.7 percent, and Christians form 7.6 percent (DCS, 2014). In Sri Lanka, Buddhism was introduced over 2,000 years ago and given these deep historical roots, most Buddhists believe that Sri Lanka is the custodian of Theravada Buddhism (Sebastian, 2012; De Silva, 1981). Hinduism has long been existing in Sri Lanka since Tamils argues that they have been living in the country for more than 2,000 years and even self-ruling some parts of the country (mostly the Northern region) for centuries (See: Rasanayagam, 1993; Britto, 1899). Islam was introduced to Sri Lanka by Arab traders in the seventh century (Sarjoon, 2017; Yusoff *et al.*, 2016; Dewaraja, 1994). Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity were introduced by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, who invaded and ruled the island country from 1505 to 1948.

The Sri Lankan constitution has also adopted provisions to allow and safeguard the religious practice of all groups based on international standards. Article 10 of the present constitution (The Second Republican adopted in 1978) guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It is framed as an absolute right that is not subject to any restrictions. Article 12 of the constitution guarantees all persons the right not to be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Article 12(2) provides "no citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such grounds" (Parliament Secretariat, 2015:5). Furthermore, Article 12(3) states that "no person...on the grounds of religion...shall be subject to any disability, liability, restriction, or condition with regard to...places of worship of his own religion" (Parliament Secretariat, 2015:5). Article 14(1)(e) of the constitution further provides "every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching" (Parliament Secretariat, 2015:6). This particular provision also embodies the rights of citizens to manifest their religious beliefs. However, as Gunetilleke (2012) points out, the distinction between the freedom to adopt and hold a religious belief and the freedom to manifest a religious belief is starkly revealed in

the jurisprudence dealing with Article 9 of the constitution. Article 9 affords Buddhism the 'foremost place' and places a duty on the state to "protect and foster the *Buddha Sasana*, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)" (Parliament Secretariat, 2015:3).

The above constitutional provisions favoring Buddhism have been highly criticized by the country's minorities and viewed as one of the major structural factors that contributed to ethnic and religious conflicts in the country. These provisions were the major motivating factor of Buddhist nationalist forces which induce them to campaign on establishing a predominant Buddhist nation-state in Sri Lanka, thus challenging the existence of religious minorities. Most of the speeches on Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim and anti-Christian campaigns of Buddhist nationalist forces refer to these constitutional provisions and urge the government to promote and protect Buddhism and its traditional heritage in the country (See: Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016).

3.2 *Religious Violence as Part of Ethno-Centric Political Culture and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*

Religious violence is not a post-civil war phenomenon and has persisted over a much longer period of time in Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka has been a religiously plural country with a history of inter-religious cohesion, religion had also been a major motive of ethnic politics, ethnic conflict, violence and civil war in Sri Lanka, particularly in the post-independent era. The famous place given to Buddhism, the major religion practicing by the majority in the country—Sinhalese—in the constitutions induced deprivation among other religiously attached minority ethnic groups and thus resulted in the development of ethnic conflict in the country.

Religion had also been a driving force behind Buddhist nationalism and intensified anti-minority sentiments and campaigns even during the colonial period. During British rule, the expansion of missionaries not only facilitated English education but also promoted the conversion of local religious groups into Christianity. This was one of the major factors that caused the reformists and nationalists to propagate and mobilize public for anti-colonialism, freedom and independence. The anti-Christian feelings were high among the Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalists and the expression of such feelings in debates as in the Panadura debate of 1862 turned into a violent clash at Kotahena in 1883 and the burning of a Catholic Church in Anuradhapura in 1903 (Pinto, 2013). During the anti-colonial period, the ethnic majority (Sinhalese) expressed their anti-minority oppositions and sentiment particularly against Muslims mainly for being a religiously distinct group and for the improvement of their socio-economic status. This was also one of the major motives that induced popular anti-Muslim riots in 1915 (See: Yusoff *et al.*, 2017; Sameem, 1997; Jeyawardena, 1985).

In the post-independence era, religion played a vital and decisive role in both the societal and political contexts in Sri Lanka. Both major political parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) gave a prominent place to Buddhism that helped the two parties to gain power in successive general elections. In fact, there have been much efforts by the above two major political parties to move towards a discourse which sought to address, if not to manipulate, the outrage among Buddhist injustices and discrimination against their religion under colonial rule (Shah, 2017). Religious elements also underpinned with the intensification of civil war by the major actors in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, the major separatist group, the LTTE targeted places of religious worship, while government forces also destroyed religious symbols of minorities in the war zones, in order to assert Buddhist dominance (Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016; ICG, 2012). Hundreds of religious worship places belonging to all religious groups became the target of terrorist violence as well as military responses during the civil war era of 3 decades. Civil war too promoted to reconsolidate a Sinhala-Buddhist state in Sri Lanka, the ideology that was counter-challenged through advocacy of a separate state concept by the Tamils and the rebel groups represented them.

The establishment of *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) as well as other organizations like the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) within the last decades or so is also significant in terms of role of religion in politics as these actors have undoubtedly been influenced in pushing for pro-Sinhalese-Buddhist agendas in the post-war politics and development (Shah, 2017). The direct involvement of Buddhist clergy in active politics, particularly through the JHU witnessed another surge of Buddhist

nationalism that highly opposed the existence and practice of other religions and religious groups in the country. It is worth noting that the religious values of Muslims too highly targeted during civil war though Muslims have maintained a non-aligned or neutral position among competing forces in civil war (See: Yusoff *et al.*, 2014; Fazil, 2005). However, Muslims never resorted to violence or separatism to respond to the violent targeting of their religion, and to practice and promote their religion.

In the post-war context, the religion took a decisive role in the process of consolidating post-war governance as well as territorial integration processes. New religious groups such as *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) and *Ravana Balakaya* (Ravana Force) emerged as to support this process. While propagating to promote and protect Buddhism in the country, these forces highly challenged the practice of duties and norms of other religions and the existence of religious minorities particularly of Muslims and Christians. Therefore, these forces violently targeted places of worship and religious teaching, as part of a broader anti-minority religious campaign. The religious violence also extended to target the economic establishments of these minorities, particularly of Muslims (See: Yusoff *et al.*, 2017; Kadirgamar, 2013).

3.3 Post-War Religious Violence Against Christians

The perception of labelling Christianity as a tool of Western colonialism was perpetuated by ardent Buddhist nationalists in the year following independence in Sri Lanka. This perspective led Christians to be viewed as 'others' and a threat to Buddhism and Sinhalese culture (MRGI, 2016). Attacks targeting Protestant Christians gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s which were highly motivated or intensified by the nationalist Buddhist movements such as SUCCESS (Society for Upliftment and Conservation of Cultural, Educational, and Social Standards). Particularly in the new millennium, the JHU started urging the introduction of laws prohibiting religious conversation. This was inciting further intolerance against the Christian community in the country. The period 2003-2004 marked the significant increase in violent attacks against Christians including targeted killings of clergy, physical violence and extensive destruction of places of worship and properties (MRGI, 2016).

In the post-civil war period, Christians together with Muslims became the target of hate campaigns and violence by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist forces. Many Christian churches were attacked in 2013 onwards. The attack on a church in Kottawa in March 2013, attacks on two churches in Hikkaduwa in January 2014 were notable among them. The Hikkaduwa attacks were marked by the visible leadership of Buddhist clergy aligned with the BBS and similar organizations. The study conducted by the National Christian Evangelical Association of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) shows that reports of 972 cases of discrimination and violence against Christians have filed during a period of two decades (1994-2014). Since 2015, 190 incidents of religious violence against churches, clergy, and Christians have been recorded by the NCEASL (LBO, 2017). However, compared with the attacks on the places of Muslims' worship and teaching, violent attacks on Christians are relatively fewer. Muslims were the major target of a renewed version of Buddhist nationalism and newly emergent extreme nationalist groups in the post-civil war era.

3.4 Anti-Muslim Religious Violence in the Post-War Context

The post-civil war era witnessed a radical increase in anti-minority religious sentiment and violence in Sri Lanka. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, which initially focused on dismantling a corresponding form of nationalism among Tamils for several decades, focused on Muslims once the war had ended (Gunetilleke, 2015). The anti-Muslim sentiments, campaigns and violence were notable among the religious hatred and intolerance instigated by the religiously motivated Buddhist groups during this period. These violent incidents have also promoted the violation of religious and other kinds of rights of Muslims. There had been increased propaganda against the religious fundamentals of Muslims such as consuming *halal* foods, *halal* food production, religious attires such as *abaya*, *hijab* and *nikab*, Islamic *sharia* (law) based practices such as Islamic marriage and divorce practices, polygamy, Islamic banking and financial systems, together with the targeting of

places of Islamic worship and teaching such as mosques and madarasas. Targeting of Muslim worship places and enterprises were highly influenced in this regard. Religious violence targeting Muslims in the post-war context can be categorized as (a) physical violence, (b) destruction of property, (c) intimidation, threat or coercion, (d) hate campaigns or propaganda, and (e) discriminatory practice. Here, we mainly focus on the physical attacks on places of religious worship and teaching.

The first anti-Muslim physical violent incident in the post-war context recorded in 2011. It was an attack on a Muslim shrine of 400-year-old in Anuradhapura, a predominant Sinhalese-Buddhist town in the north-central province which is considered as historically significant. This attack was accompanied by a mob of more than 100 people reportedly led by Buddhist monks, spearheaded by Ven. Amatha Dhamma Thero, who said the shrine was destroyed because the local Muslims were trying to turn it into a mosque (Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016; CPA, 2013). Following the Anuradhapura attack, the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces staged a number of direct violent attacks on mosques and other places of worship belonging to Muslims in predominantly Sinhalese areas. The shameful attack on a mosque in Dambulla, a predominately Sinhalese town in the north-central province in April 2012, was one of the major attacks in this regard. A chief Buddhist priest led the attack, with a group of about 2000 people forcefully entered the Dambulla Kairiya Jumma mosque and destroyed everything inside. Though there were no casualties, the mosque had also come under a petrol bomb attack in the early hours of the morning preceding the mob violence (Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016; CPA, 2013; BBC News, 2012). The major justification given by the demonstrators was that the Dambulla is a sacred Buddhist area in which no religious practice could be allowed for those other than Buddhists. However, according to the Muslim Council, the main umbrella group of Sri Lankan Muslims, the mosque building was lawfully registered and 60 years old, and it had been there long before the area was declared a sacred zone 20 years ago (Secretariat for Muslims, 2015; Wickramasinghe, 2014).

Following the Dambulla mosque attack, there were attacks and anti-Muslim demonstrations against the establishment of mosques and religious teaching institutions in many parts of the country. Some of the worst incidents include the attacks and demonstration against a Madrasa at Dehiwala in May 2012, the burning of the Jumma mosque in Unnichai village in Batticaloa district in August 2012, attacks causing damage to the loudspeaker and sound system of the Mohideen Jumma mosque of Kohilawatte, Wellampitiya, in Colombo in August 2012, and the burning of the inside of the Thakkiya Mosque at Malwathu Lane of Malwathu Oya, Sinha Kanuwa, Anuradhpura, in October 2012 (on the day of the Hajj festival), which was followed by a protest demanding the removal of the above-mentioned mosque in January 2013 (See: Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016; Secretariat for Muslims, 2015).

Among the incidents reported in 2013, the worst included the defacing of a wall of the Meera Makkam mosque in Kandy in the early hours of the morning, the forced closure of a mosque (Masjithul Araba) in Mahiyangana after raw pork and stones were thrown into the building during Friday prayers on 18 July 2013 (during the holy month of Ramadan), and calculated attacks on the Grandpass mosque in August 2013 (See: Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016; Secretariat for Muslims 2015; CPA, 2013). Religious tensions and violence instigated by the BBS in Aluthgama, a predominant Muslim village in the Western province in June 2014 was seen as the crowning event that not only challenged the practice of Islamic religious principles but also the existence of Muslims in the country (See: Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016). Following these incidents, anti-Muslim sentiments and violence gained international attention, including from the United Nations, which intensified international criticisms and oppositions to Sri Lanka regarding the violation of religious rights of minority.

While there were increased criticisms regarding the inability of government authorities to control the anti-Muslim violence, Muslim religious places still continued to be targeted. The attack on the Meera Makkam mosque in Kandy in July 2015, and attack on a mosque closer to Keththaarama, Colombo, on 19 July 2015, attacks on a mosque in Gintoda on 17th November 2017, violent attacks at Mosque in Amparai town on 26 February 2018, and the series of one-week anti-Muslim riots (including targets on religious places) in many Muslim pockets (particularly in Udispattuwa, Teldeniya, Digana, Tennakumbura, Pallegala, Kadugastoda, Akurana etc.) in Kandy district in February-March 2018 were some of the more recent popular incidents which received the

international attention mainly since they were instigated during the so-called national government for 'good governance' and to lack of state response to curtail the violence and tension (See: Jeyaraj, 2018; Rameez, 2018; Colombo Telegraph, 2017; Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016). A series of anti-Muslim violence (including attacks on mosques and religious teaching places) instigated by the Buddhist nationalist forces and tags following the Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 attacks are the recent examples for how Muslims became the target and victims of Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka although it is clearly observed that Muslim community was not supporting the groups involved in Easter Sunday attacks (See: Farook, 20019; Singh, 2019). These attacks and violent incidents impacted on Muslims in number of ways include the killing of few Muslims, the injuring of many, the destruction of their places of worship, and challenges to their faith practices and duties, and controlling their physical movements with religious identifies and attires. Most of these incidents have taken place under the mask of a disgraceful 'Buddhist-cleansing of Sri Lanka and opposing Islamic revival and radicalism'—propagated by the BBS and other extreme nationalist forces (Sarjoon *et al.*, 2016).

3.5 The State Response to Religious Violence and Its Role in Maintaining Religious Harmony

Although the religious violence, particularly the anti-Muslim violence, was seriously and negatively impacting religious practice and the socio-economic and cultural lives of religious minorities, the government authorities were largely ineffective in containing the violence and unapologetic in its aftermath, shifting the blame to the Muslims for provoking the violence. The state apparatus (or actors) took little action in controlling religious violence and maintaining religious tolerance among groups. However, they played direct or indirect roles in supporting or promoting the groups which were motivating anti-minority religious violence. The negative involvement of state authorities in religious violence included orders or actions of those authorities that directly discriminates against a particular (minority) community member, failure to uphold the victim's legal rights, the condoning of an illegal act, and forcing the particular communities to stop worship or places of worship. All their negative interventions led to the violation of constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion and the right to religious worship and practice.

It is worth noting that in most cases, religious violence was executed in the presence of police (civil security force) officers who did nothing to stop the attack or violence. The role of the police is to maintain civil order and peace. In tense situation, the police and military can give prior protection to avoid potential violence and their severe impact. But, in Sri Lanka, in many religious violence cases in the post-civil war era, the police or military could not do anything to stop the violence. The famous attacks to destroy the 400-year-old Anuradhapura Muslim shrine was held in the presence of police officers who did not do anything to stop the attack but were just there to observe. To cite another example referring to Christian community, the Sunday worship service of the Apostolic church in January 2016 in Alawwa was disrupted by Buddhist clergy and a large group of villagers who forcibly entered the church and threatened the Christian pastor with violence if he continued the service. Later, when the pastor sought to file a complaint with the police, the police officer-in-charge refused to record his complain (MRGI, 2016).

On the other hand, the state apparatus, particularly related to the implementation of law and order and maintain civil peace in society, have also failed to control or positively tame religious conflict and violence. Almost none of those who were directly or indirectly responsible to or motivated the religious violence against minorities were not found accused of those incidents or brought into judicial review. Particularly, the BBS chief, Ven. Gnanasara Thero propagated anti-Muslim campaigns that motivated violence on many occasions. He openly opposed and questioned the fundamentals of Islam—the *Al-Quran* and the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. He also questioned and threatened the judiciary, religious leaders, even heads of state and government for failing to control Islamic revivalism and radicalism. Similarly, there were signs of a potential violent incident in Aluthgama, Beruwala when Gnanasara Thero of the BBS made a destructive speech against Muslims on 15th June 2014, the day riots erupted in many parts of Aluthgama in Beruwala. In this speech, Gnanasara incited the Sinhalese to finish off the Muslims, using the derogatory term 'Marakkalayas.' In the presence of a rousing crowd, he said that "if one 'Marakkalaya' lays a hand

on a Sinhalese, that will be the end of all of them” (Colombo Telegraph, 2014). In his speech, he threatened to destroy Muslim businesses in Aluthgama, Beruwala, and other places. He also instructed his listeners to grab any bags with a *halal* sign and throw them on the ground. Additionally, he asked his audience to fight against minorities (Colombo Telegraph, 2014). However, he was not found accused of promoting religious intolerance and was brought to the review of judiciary. No President, Prime Minister or any Minister of that time had shown their opposition against the Gnanasara’s speech or strongly urged the government to act against those who responsible for challenging religious harmony in the country.

The position of police and military forces during the recent anti-Muslim violence in Amparai town and in Kandy areas in 2018, and in many parts of Negombo, and in many Muslim pockets in Kurunegala district during 2019 April-May violent incidents have clearly indicated the incapacity of state response to curtail or control the religious violence. Particularly, in the case of Amparai violent incidents, particularly targeting a Muslim restaurant arguing that food contained suspicious sterilization pills, policemen were in front of the incidents and did not do anything to restrain the mob. In the case of attacks on Amparai mosque, the Police station was less than a Kilometres away from the Mosque. The cops had been informed of the attack as the mob arrived on the scene. It would have taken the Police only three minutes to reach the Mosque. Yet they arrived leisurely after 55 minutes. The mob was still in town then but the Police made no effort to tackle the violent elements. Some cops were seen conversing with the mobsters in a jovial manner. It was as if a heroic war had been waged and a deadly enemy had been vanquished. A powerful propaganda campaign against Muslims in general and Amparai Muslims, in particular, was launched in the aftermath of the Amparai violence (Jeyaraj, 2018). In the case of Kandy violence in 2018, it took hours and days for police and military forces to come to the targeting places and in many occasions, according to many pictures displaced in media, they did not do anything to restrain the mob to curtail the violence. The many of the anti-Muslim violent incidents in the post-Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 also witnessed the inability of state apparatus in controlling religious violence against Muslims. Most of those incidents were held during the impose of curfew and in the presence of police and military forces. The mobsters involved in the attacks covered their faces while ban was imposed for covering face for security reasons. In fact, weak institutional governance in countries and contexts where atrocities have previously taken place, could create trigger new atrocities. Attacks on Muslims by the Sinhalese-Buddhist mobs, whiles units of the police and Special Task Force (STF)—both accused of atrocities in the past is chilling reminder of how impunity fuels more lawless behavior by those enjoy it.

While there were serious anti-Muslim campaigns and violence intensified by the Buddhist nationalist forces, and there were huge criticisms on the ineffectiveness of government actors to control the violence, the politicians and administrators were also directly and indirectly supporting these extreme nationalist forces. In March 2013, for instance, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the then secretary of defense ministry and one of the brothers of President Rajapaksa, signaled his open support for the BBS by attending the opening ceremony of its Buddhist leadership academy. In his speech, Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said that he decided to attend the event after realizing its timely importance. According to him, these Buddhist clergies who are engaged in a nationally important task should not be feared or doubted by anyone (Gunasekara, 2013). It is highly noted that with the change of Rajapaksa regime in the early 2015 and thereafter, the organized anti-Muslim and anti-Christian violent activities of these nationalist forces have progressively reduced. This clearly shows that there was a close relationship between the regime or state actors and the state’s ineffectiveness to responses to the anti-minority religious violence and campaigns during this period.

4. Discussion

The Buddhist revivalist movements that began in the late nineteenth century in Sri Lanka provided much of the impetus for a stronger role of Buddhism in the state and it has been credited with transforming and shaping Sri Lankan’s history by favoring the majority and marginalizing minorities (Tambiah, 1992). As many noticed, during the Rajapaksa administration (2005–2014), particularly

after the end of civil war in 2009, the rapid reemergence of Buddhist nationalism was evident in Sri Lanka. Buddhist supremacy was flaunted in television, movies, and newspapers. Moreover, Buddha statues were purposely erected in predominant Muslim and Tamil areas in the North-Eastern region. The military was used to erect Buddhist statues and Buddhist symbols in the newly captured territories in the North-Eastern region. Many new radical nationalist forces emerged, advocating for the protection and promotion of Buddhism and Sinhalese culture in the country. These forces were highly critical of the rapid growth and modernization of other religious communities and their influence in the society. Since there has been an increase of reformist movements among Muslims and a rapid change of their culture and way of life, these radical nationalist forces started campaigns particularly against Muslims and targeted their places of worship and religious teaching, cultural norms and practice, and their livelihood activities.

As Graves (2015) rightly pointed out, we should look at how religious actors imagine and apply religion to provide legitimacy to specific political acts and violence. In fact, in Sri Lanka, both rulers and nationalist forces have used religion as a hegemonic means to extend their dominance in society and hold on to power. The mob violence instigated by the Buddhist nationalist forces had other purposes than religion and were often politically organized or motivated. Although there were pressures and voices from different forces that necessitated controlling the anti-minority—particularly anti-Muslim hatred and violence—so as to restore ethnic and religious harmony in the post-civil war context, the rulers and the responsible government authorities have failed to do so, believing that through this means they can preserve and sustain their power basis (Sarjoon *et al.* 2016).

It is worth noting that the anti-minority sentiments developed and imposed on minorities in the post-war context was also triggered by the sense of powerlessness the Sinhala-Buddhist majority feel in the global context. Although the Sinhalese form a clear majority in Sri Lanka, they are a global minority ethnic group and have long felt surrounded by non-Buddhists in South Asian region. This marginalized feeling has created fear and insecurity among the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists and incited opposition to minorities, so as to safeguard Sinhalese identity and their religion. Therefore, historically, religious and political leaders and ethnic entrepreneurs have emphasized the fact that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese-Buddhist country and therefore it is important to oppose any threat to Sinhalese and Buddhism in any form and from any source (Sarjoon *et al.* 2016). Since the post-war ethno-nationalism has received major support from government authorities as a means for them to sustain power, there has been no immediate justice for the minorities. Sasanka Perera (2001) has observed that the retelling of history in the *Mahāvamsa* by Buddhist monks characterized wars waged by Sinhalese rulers as campaigns undertaken to protect Buddhism and the Sinhalese nation. He claims that these accounts eventually dominated the consciousness of the Sinhalese majority and formed an important aspect of socialization in contemporary Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, the constitutional or legal provisions on the protection of religions are also weak or contradictory in strengthening religious pluralism and harmony in the country. In the 1978 constitution-making process, politicians engineered the substitution of the 'Buddhism' with '*Buddha Sasana*' having sought input from various Buddhist organizations. The Buddhism clause in the constitution is an example how rulers adopted legal provisions to promote the religion of the majority and marginalized the religions of minorities. The constitutional articulation of the state duty to protect and poster the '*Buddha Sasana*' while assuring the rights of other religions not only appears ambiguous, but also contradictory. This provision has been expansively interpreted in many different directions, including the notion that religious freedom cannot be exercised at the expense of Buddhism (Shah, 2017).

The post-civil war attacks on mosques and churches were mainly justified by the nationalist groups in that they were built illegally (without proper permission) or they are not officially registered. In fact, Sri Lankan law did not require state authorization or registration of places of worship or religious bodies. However, in 2008, government attempted to impose a new rule in this regard. The new circular on the construction of new places of worship issued by the then Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment in 2008 consists of an instruction issued to provincial councils and divisional secretaries that the construction of new places of worship requires prior approval of the ministry. This 2008 circular has been widely used to support the restriction or

prohibition of places of worship of religious minorities. There are also instances where the circular was used to prohibit prayer meetings in private residences during the periods of intense anti-minority religious sentiments and violence. The circular was also used to shut down existing churches and mosques or worship services that were not registered with the authority. However, the circular lacked any legal basis, and no law authorities or the ministry to regulate places of worship in such a manner. The widespread enforcement of the circular illustrated the persistent nature of local [unauthorized] actor's involvement in religious discrimination and violence (LBO, 2017).

On the other hand, the newly emerging socio-cultural, economic and political contexts in the post-war period has also partly attributed the easy targeting of religious fundamentals and practice of Muslims. The civil war itself was actually promoted as to defeat the minorities' challenges to the united as well as unitary nature of Sri Lankan state. Therefore, the fall or defeat of the LTTE—the major armed group advocating separate state for Tamils in the North-Eastern Sri Lanka—created a competing power vacuum at the societal level. There was no any competing force to oppose and act against whatever the pro-Sinhalese government wanted to do in opposing the minorities demands. This power vacuum context induced the revival of ethno-nationalist forces, and helped them to develop an ethnic consciousness among Sinhalese as to strongly reconceptualize 'Sri Lanka' as 'a Sinhala-Buddhist nation' and 'a strong unitary state' in which there is no place for the accommodation and advancement of other ethno-religious groups and their demands for power-sharing and regional autonomy (Sarjoo *et al.*, 2016). The post-civil war regime, considering the internal crises within the Muslim political forces, strategically promoted divisions and fragmentations within Muslim community and their polity. This compelled the major Muslim political forces to go behind the regime and support its agenda. In many cases, when religious violence intensified against Muslims, the Muslim political forces have failed to voice towards Muslims and pressure the state apparatus to control the violence collectively.

As a member country in the United Nations Organization (UNO), any government of Sri Lanka has the responsibility to adhere and implement the number of resolutions and provisions adopted by the UNO and its agencies as to ensure the rights of religious groups particularly of religious minorities. The Article 20(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights requires states to prohibit hate speeches. Accordingly, any advocacy of national, radical or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law. Sri Lanka has accepted many human rights related international resolutions and adopted provisions in the constitution and laws based on them. However, with regard to the implementation of these international resolutions and norms accepted by Sri Lanka and the provisions adopted in the constitution and laws on the subject of protecting and promoting religions and religious harmony, the more policy reforms and commitment of authorities and officials is needed. Because, the Sri Lankan legal framework is confronted with serious challenges with respect to its relevance and application to religious freedom and promoting religious pluralism. It is worth noting that progressive judgements that vindicate the freedom of religion and protect religious minorities are extremely rare in Sri Lanka. Provisions in the law meant to protect religious freedom are used selectively against certain minorities who criticize the state and regimes. Meanwhile, perpetrators of hate speech have enjoyed impunity or in other words, 'state patronage.' This oblique legal framework has underscored communal relations and has afforded extremist groups the space to carry out violence and violations with impunity against religious minorities. Therefore, the government must pay attention to the above concerns in its post-war reconciliation and conflict resolution process (Gunetilleke, 2015). Policy adoption and implementation to take strong deterrent action to prevent incidents of inter-faith intolerance and make every endeavor to arrest the occurrence of such incidents is a must from the government side. Ministries of religious affairs, and law and order are highly responsible state actors in this regard.

In an ethnically and religiously plural country, the commitment of government authorities is essential to ensure that law and order are preserved and properly implemented, the lives of all citizens, places of their worship and properties would be protected in keeping with constitutional provisions to resist practicing or promoting either directly or tacitly any act or procedure which discriminate against one religious group or community or favors another. In fact, in Sri Lanka, the

failure to accept and address the key issues pertaining to peace, co-existence and religious pluralism within the legislative framework has widened the gap in relationship between religiously attached groups and caused several violent attacks on religious places, religious practices and the much-respected cultural norms of religious groups particularly of minorities in the post-war era. The future initiatives and discussions for reconciliations must give urgent priority to the above matters and related issues in order to ensure the religious accommodation in post-war reconciliation process necessary to build harmonious relationship in plural society.

5. Conclusions

Religious violence has been a part of the Sri Lankan political culture even before its independence. In an effort to establish a majoritarian ethno-religious nation-state, the religiously motivated nationalist and political groups induced violence against religious minorities in the post-independence era. Religious violence was also part of civil war that targeted to undermine the religious distinctiveness, fundamentals and places of worship of ethno-religious groups. However, the military defeat of the LTTE and the end of civil war created a competing power vacuum at societal and political level in the country. With the support of political forces and authorities, the major religiously motivated nationalist groups re-conceptualized 'majoritarian religious hegemony' in the country. The regime of that time also motivated the anti-minority religious hatred, sentiments and violence intensified by these forces expecting to continue in power. The result was highly negative, and the religious fundamentals of religious minorities and their practice were highly questioned and challenged.

From 2011 up to May 2019, there were hundreds of violent incidents reported targeting against religious minorities, particularly against Muslims and Christians. The Muslims were the highest target of these religious violence during this period together with serious campaigns against their religious fundamentals particularly in terms of 'anti-halal', 'anti-animal slaughtering' and 'anti-Sharia system' (Islamic law). Killings and injuries of innocent civilians, loss of properties, attacks on places of worship and teaching places were the major impact of the religious violence in the post-civil war context. In many cases, rational justice to the victims was not restored due to the negative intervention of state actors, and the lack of law enforcement during this period.

The regime changing in 2015 indicated that the operation on (or of) religious violence by the anti-minority Buddhist nationalist groups would reduce under the so-called Sirisena-Wickramasinghe coalition or national unity government. This also signaled the less space for impunity and organized religious violence in the country. However, it was not an assurance that these forces will not repeat their operation in future. In fact, the violence targeting religious minorities continued albeit at a lower level for some years and were intensified from 2018. The anti-Muslim violence intensified in the Gintoda and Kandy-Digana areas were the worse among the post-war religious violence while country was ruling by so-called unity government under the slogan of 'Good Governance' advocating for post-war reconciliation and the restoration of justice and accommodation of minority rights. The violence and extremism against Muslims following Easter Sunday attacks in April-May 2019 were instigated during the impose of curfew and in the presence of government police and military forces which justified that the violence against minorities can easily be instigated in the absence of responsive government and state apparatus.

Until recently, there has been a concentration of threats, protest marches, hate speeches and prospect attacks involving in many parts of the minority concentrated areas in the country by the radical nationalist forces. The state has a role in controlling or managing them. However, the state's response to control these forces has been relatively ineffective. Even under the so-called 'Government for good governance,' those responsible for the previous cases of anti-minority religious violence have not been held accountable. The new government has also not made any comprehensive policy measure to control religious radicalism in the country. Inability of state (government) apparatus to effectively address the harassment of religious minorities as well as to control radical religious movements suggest the tacit approval of the state apparatus for the campaigns and violence towards religious minorities. In fact, as happened under the earlier regime, the authorities of good governance also show little interest in applying the laws of the country to

control the extreme religious forces that are motivating religious hatred and violence against minorities, mainly for their political advantages. This will definitely negatively influence the process of ethnic reconciliation and religious harmony in the country.

In any plural society, accepting and accommodating religious and cultural diversity and the distinctive features including the religious rights, culture and norms of all communities and groups become necessary for maintaining religious pluralism, religious harmony and communal peace within that society. There is an urgency for Sri Lankan government authorities and civil actors to carefully work on the reconciliation of religious hatred and violence that are highly motivated in the post-civil war era against minorities. Ensuring the sustainability of peaceful ethnic relations and religious pluralism that had uniquely colored Sri Lankan societal and political history highly depends on the necessary law and policy reforms and their rational implementation, as part of the broader post-war reconciliation process.

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