

Muslim Politics of Sri Lanka and Roles of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka has been viewed as the politics of Muslim based on the major political parties in Sri Lanka since independence. On this backdrop, the Muslim politics viewed as politics of the southern Muslims and politics of north-eastern Muslim based on their affiliation with the major, ethnic and regional parties. However, the emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), as a Muslim party based on Islamic faith and Muslim's rights among the eastern Muslim in the middle of 1980s paved the way for tremendous impacts and contributed to dynamic changes in traditional setups of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. Most importantly, the Muslim politics began to turn to a path of ideology and identity based politics. Then, the politics of Sri Lankan Muslims have come to be viewed as the politics of the SLMC and vice-versa, nationally and internationally. The politics of the SLMC brought the Muslim community in Sri Lanka at a time.

However, the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka became to loose its pride and shifted to another trend after the demise of the founder leader of the SLMC, Mr. M.H.M. Ashraff, in September 2000. There were break-ups and ups and downs in the politics of the SLMC as well as the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka. This research paper tries to pay attention to the cleavages within the SLMC and its impacts in the politics of the SLMC and in the discourse of Muslim politics of Sri Lanka.

KEY WORDS: Minority party, ethnic political party, Sri Lankan Muslim politics, politics of Sri Lanka

Traditional Model of Muslim Politics in Sri Lanka

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka has been identified as a moderate and harmonious community by the majorities. Historically their political conducts also been identified as neutral one. There was a tendency of coalition politics of Muslims with the Sinhala kings and people in the pre and post-independent period in Sri Lanka. Therefore, a golden characteristic of cordial relationship between the Muslims and Sinhala kingdoms, especially with Kandian Kingdom was identified

in the history. This golden opportunity paved the Muslim community to be served as ministers, ambassadors, militia, arbitrator, royal medical experts and business partners etc in the Sinhalese kingdom. During the ancient period, Muslims community had enjoyed political patronage. The Muslim community has come to solemnly put their trust and believes on Sinhala king and people vice-versa.

The earliest or the first generation of Muslim leaders in Sri Lanka, such as Sir Rasik Fareed, T.B.Jaya and Bathiud-in-Mahmood have emerged with the political and moral support of Sinhalese. Majority of the Muslims have been supported the major Sinhalese parties, the UNP and the SLFP in the post-independent Sri Lanka. Even after the emergence of Muslim distinct political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the majority of the Southern Muslims' political orientation followed the same. At the same time, the Muslims in the North-Eastern parts of Sri Lanka politically made alliances with the major Sinhalese (UNP and SLFP) and Tamil parties, the FP and TULF.

Muslims in the post-independent history of Sri Lanka have given important or responsible ministries (such as Education, Health, Transport, and other post (such as Speaker, Mayors and Ambassadors) in governments and political process.

Paradigm Shift in Muslim Politics in Sri Lanka

A paradigm shift has taken place in the process of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka with the emergence of a Muslim separate distinct political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (thereafter the SLMC) in 1986¹. The intensification of ethnic conflict and internal civil war in the North-Eastern parts of Sri Lanka after 1983 paved divisions and cleavages among the communities, politically and culturally. Thereafter, the Ethnic and identity divisions were forwarded in political process. Mutual suspicions and prejudices were also emerged, especially among the Tamil-Muslim-Sinhala communities in the North-East. In due cause, violence and injustice incidents became to increase in the every-day social life (Mohideen,1987).² Like, the Tamils, the North-Eastern Muslim community also paid a lot to the ethnic conflict and civil war. Not only their properties, livelihoods residents were devastated by the war, but also their right to live in their home land also has threatened.

When major Sinhala and Tamil political parties were failed to protect the Muslims' properties and lives and their interests in the discourse of conflict and peace process of that time, there was a need for a distinct political party as a strong political force to protect the Muslim community. The emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslims Congress was a need of the time and protected the Muslim community, specially the youngsters from turning to terrorist or armed groups on that time.

After the emergence of the SLMC, the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka became to be looked as the Muslim politics with major Sinhalese parties and the politics with the Muslim party, the SLMC. However, later on, the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka have come to be dominated by the politics of SLMC.

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Influence of the SLMC in the Muslim and National Politics of Sri Lanka

The SLMC has able influence deeply in the Muslim politics as well as in national politics of Sri Lanka. It grown as the third force in national politics with the capabilities of influencing in the government; became to articulate the interests and rights of the Muslims community, and voiced for the forgotten Muslim community. The influence of the SLMC in the Muslim and national politics can be summarized under the themes: politically, economically and socially.

Politically

The SLMC emerged and acted as a distinct political voice for Muslim community in the discourse of ethnic conflict and conflict resolution in Sri Lankan context. It popularized and internationalized the Muslims' issues and affects in the conflict situation in the North-East. The conflict in Sri Lanka was viewed as a two-polar one; between the Tamils and the Sinhalese governments. However, the SLMC was able to internationalize the issues by insisting the North-Eastern Muslim community also involved and affected by the ethnic conflict and civil war of Sri Lanka. When the world concern was turned to the grievances of the North-Eastern Muslim community, the governments of Sri Lanka also have come to consider the Muslims as one of the integral actors of the map of ethnic conflict and peace process of Sri Lanka.

With the electoral representation to the parliaments, the SLMC was able to give meaningful representation to the Muslim community. It was identified as distinct representation.³ The whole parliament of Sri Lanka turned to the speeches of SLMC representatives to listen to the issues of Muslim community with likes or dislikes. Only the SLMC representatives put forwarded the issues and demands of the Muslim community before the parliaments. Most of the other Muslim members and ministers wanted to articulate the interests of the governments only.

Another impact of the SLMC in the national politics of Sri Lanka could be identified as the emergence of influencing third force within a short period of time. Within a three year of political history, it could able to gain four (04) representations in the national parliament; the third force in terms of representation and votes, and able to secure second place in the North-Eastern provincial council; the main opposition party. In 1994, it faced the general election with an agreement of the opposition coalition, the People's Alliance (PA) and achieved 9 seats in the tenth parliament. It was the rights amount of the balance in total number (113) to form a government in Sri Lanka (The Associated News Papers of Sri Lanka, 1995). So, the SLMC rose as a queen making party in that election. This situation continued until 2004 general election. In all elections from 2000 one (2001 & 2004) the SLMC played a critical rule as king or queen making party.

The SLMC have provided a charismatic leadership to the Muslim politics as well as the national politics of Sri Lanka. When M.H.M.Ashraff, who rose as a popular senior lawyer and then a Muslim activist declared his political movements, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) as a political party in 1986, the whole nation became to turn on his leadership. When he entered to the Parliament and advocated to the affected and forgotten Muslim community the whole world turned to his leadership. In fact, M.H.M.Ashraff played a vital role within and outside the PA government⁴ (Tharmakulasingham, 2000). His decisions were more effective and community oriented. There are number of examples and learning in his endeavors. However, it is very difficult to evaluate as how much his leadership influenced within the politics of the SLMC after his demise.

The SLMC in its political process worked for the unity and social harmony of this country. Even though the party named as Muslim congress and worked for the betterment of the Muslim community, from the beginning of its active politics, it attracted a considerable number of members from the other communities in Sri Lanka. It included members of other community in its nomination papers. It is evident that the SLMC nominated Mr.Asita Perera, a Singalese, as its national list Member of Parliament in 1994. When the SLMC leader formed another political party, the National Unitary Alliance (NUA) in 1998 with the purpose of conducting a national politics, it attracted many people from other communities. Many Sinhalese and Tamil politicians were actively involved in the politics of NUA. There were many members from other community included in the polit-bureau of the SLMC and the NUA. In 2000 general election, Mr.Vimalaweera Disanayake, a Sinhalese, was elected as a member of parliament from Digamadulla district under the NUA ticket. This is testimony to the hard work of the SLMC toward uniting communities. Furthermore, the SLMC named its secretariat as “Dharussalaam”- a home for peace and declared open it for any citizen searching for peace.

The SLMC advocated for the equal development of all community. Therefore, it worked for the equal development of each community, especially in the Eastern province and for the Northern Muslims who were forced to leave from their homeland. For this purpose, when it made alliance with the PA government, it bargained for the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. Using the ministry fund it could able to rebuild all sectors of affected communities. The reconstruction of Digavapi Viharaya, a popular religious worship place in the Sinhala history, was one of the critical and testimonial development events of the SLMC leader. The SLMC leader, during the 1994-2000 allocated considerable amount of money for the reconstruction of other religious places too. Further, his ministry initiated a project of constructing “Resettled Model Villages” where all communities were accommodated in this project. When the SLMC leader made arranged to provide jobs within his ministry authorities, he could able to include considerable amount of job seekers from other communities.

Politically and socially, the SLMC had maintained a strong and cordial relationship with other community leaders and politician of all ethnic groups. SLMC maintained a cordial relationship with the major Sinhalese party, the SLFP (or later the PA) and the UNP. It was able to invite leaders of both parties to its national conferences. At the same time it was able to maintain strong and special relationship with the major Tamil parties, the Tamils United Liberation Front (TULF) and with the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC). In fact, Ashraff, the founder leader of the SLMC have started his political career from the TULF in 1970s. It made political agreements with these parties. Ashraff-Thondaman Agreement, Ashraff-Chandrika Agreement are popular in the politics of 1990s.

Economically

The SLMC played an important role in the economic development of the Muslim community in the Northern and the Eastern province of Sri Lanka. Economically the Muslim community like other communities cherished after the SLMC become equal partner in the government. The SLMC advocated for the rehabilitation and relief of the affects or costs of the Muslim community in the cause of civil war. Due to the ethnic conflict and civil war, thousands of Muslims in the North-East were compelled to displace internally without bringing any economic sources with them. When the SLMC became as a ruling partner, it advocated for the compensation of the economic losses. Further, the SLMC was able to provide thousands of job opportunities to the Muslims mainly in the port authority which was a rare chance. Clearly it was a boost for the Muslim community.

In the economic contribution of the SLMC to the Muslim community, the initiatives for the construction of the Olivil Port become important and unforgettable. In fact, the south eastern region has not been given favor in the process of economic development of post independent Sri Lanka. No major industries were open except some garment factories during Premadasa presidency. Therefore, the SLMC bargained to build-up a port in this region to facilitate and initiate the economic development activities in this region. Even though the project was initially criticized by majority of the Muslims of this region as it would lead to Sinhalization of this region, the SLMC and its leader was very keen in building up this port as it would lead to the massive development of this region. Initial steps and surveys were taken up during the period of M.H.M.Ashraff, the founder leader. In 2008, even though the SLMC had not with the government, the official inauguration of the port project was started and the construction works are going on with the purpose of completing the project before 2012 (The Colombo Page, 2008). Anyone who sees with the rational eyes will accept the project as it would lead the massive development of this region and the surrounding regions.

Socially

The SLMC also contributed to the socio-cultural conditions of the Muslim and other community in the North-Eastern provinces. Using the rehabilitation ministry fund, the SLMC leader paid more attention on re-buildings of schools, cultural heritages and social institutions to strengthen social and cultural network within and outside the community. The Establishment of South Eastern University and the Muslim Cultural Museum are the notable and unforgettable contribution of socio-economic development the SLMC. The Establishment of South Eastern University is the major achievement of the SLMC in its bargaining politics with the PA government⁵. When the situation became worst as the Muslim students could not attend lectures and stay in the hostels in the North-Eastern universities due to the intense of the ethnic conflict and civil war in the region, the SLMC advocated for the establishment of a new university in a safe place in the South Eastern Region, where majority of the population are Muslims. Since the demand was rational and support of the SLMC was essential, the PA government accepted the demand and established the South Eastern University in Oluvil, a coastal area of Ampara district. At the beginning majority of the students allocated to this university was Muslims. However, at presents there are considerable amount of Sinhala and Tamil students are studying and functioning as a national university. It contributed to raise it voice for the Muslim community when they forgotten in the past initiatives for peace process in Sri Lanka. It is to note that the Oluvil Declaration(Jeyaraj, 2003:14; Student Union, 2003; McGilvray & Raheem, 2007: 41)⁶ which insisted autonomy for Muslims and the Muslim nationalism was initiated by the South Eastern University community.

Furthermore the SLMC supported to the promotion and the protection of the traditional practices and the cultural heritages of the Muslim community by insisting to re-stage those practices in the public and political events.

The Break-up of the SLMC

The SLMC, a small Muslim based party played a vital role in Muslim and nation politics of Sri Lanka as the “Third Force” and the “Queen Making Party” for a period of over one decade became to break-up after the sudden demise of its founder leader, M.H.M.Ashraff in 16th September 2000.⁷ The demise made unrecoverable space in the Muslim as well as national politics. Many factors influenced to the break-up of the SLMC. Major of them are identified as follows.

The Sudden Demise of Founder Leader of the SLMC

The sudden demise of M.H.M.Ashraff was basically identified as the key factor to the break-up of the party. Because, no second leadership was identified within the

party structure by the national leader. M.H.M.Ashraff never indicated or expressed any one within the party as the next leader. There were no experiences as an acting leadership in the party. Ashraff was very keen in protecting the party leadership. Whenever he faced challenges to his leadership he was successful in removing the person from the party. There was a strong control of M.H.M.Ashraff in all aspects of the party affairs. Therefore, groups emerged within the party to take control the party leadership, immediately after the demise of Ashraff. The result was like that while Mrs. Ferial Ashraff, widow of late Ashraff, in religious practice for his husband, she and Mr.Rauff Hakeem, the party secretary were selected as a co-leaders to the SLMC. This decision was reached due to the split of two groups within the party and the understanding among them.

Leadership rift / competition in terms of leadership and the influence of South within the party after the demise of its founder leader, who came from the East

In the battle of the leadership rift, however, later on South was able to influence within the party and to control the whole party which was completely reacted by the East negatively. The SLMC hailed from the Eastern province and mostly supported by the North-Eastern Muslims. There were more criticisms and less supports from the Southern Muslims. When the SLMC was inaugurated as a political party in 1986, most of the Southern Muslim politicians and leaders criticized the SLMC as “nonsense one”. However, the SLMC emerged and influenced in the Muslim and nation politics. Specially, at a time, the SLMC was viewed as a whole of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. Since the SLMC’s political base was in the East, most of the Eastern members in the politburo and the supporters insisted the fact that the leadership after the demise of M.H.M.Ashraf should go to Eastern province. However, within a short period, the SLMC leadership went to Rauff Hakeem, a member (not a founder member) from the South. This caused East-South leadership competition / rift within the party. Later on, it paved way for the emergence of more small parties from the SLMC. Still, many SLMC members and the others who left the SLMC and formed other parties are indicating that the leadership of the SLMC should be given to a member of the Eastern Province. They put conditions that the present leadership of the SLMC should change to unite the SLMC and the other Muslim parties, originated from the SLMC. It is obvious that the Eastern Muslims have traditionally neglected the Northern Muslim leaders when the SLMC emerged and began to influence in the national politics. Therefore, when a southern member of the SLMC became leader of the party, it was negatively re-acted by the eastern members. In fact, later on the southern members became to dominate the party and the Eastern members and the Muslims became neglected. Fundamentals of the Eastern Muslims’ issues were neglected when they party made alliance with the major Sinhala parties. Even though the support of the SLMC was essentials to form a government in 2000,

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2001 and 2002 elections, the SLMC leader could not bargain and taken assurances for the basic issues that the Muslim community faced. Creation of a separate administrative district at the coastal areas of Amparai district, construction of Ouvil port, separate Muslim delegation at the peace talks, and security and self determination of the North-Eastern Muslims are some of the major issues that the Muslims wanted to highlight at the top level and need solution. However, it could not do anything by the SLMC to solve these issues. It was criticized that the main reason for all these inabilities of the party was the leadership change. Traditionally the Southern Muslim leaders had been alliance mostly with the UNP and their first priority was their business and trade. When the SLMC led by a southern leader, he also became to conduct politics how the traditional southern Muslim leaders did. The coalition of the UNP was one of the testimonies for this argument. M.H.M.Ashraff obviously expressed his rejection of joining the UNP until it leads by Mr.Ranil Wickramasinghe. However, Mr.Rauff Hakeem who advocated Ashraff policy extended his support to the UNP which was highly criticized by many members from the East. Further, during the leadership of the Rauff Hakeem, the Islamic fundamental or the principals of the party also became questions. All these decisions and the events paved more splits within the party.

Sinhala Factors

It was indicated that the Sinhala politicians were played a vital role in dividing the SLMC for their political sake. For them, the SLMC, a small Muslim party is determining their political destiny and future. Therefore, they always propagated that the stand of depending on minorities should be changed. In fact, the SLMC founder leader, M.H.M.Ashraff openly challenging them and bargained more. Many Sinhala leaders within and outside the government were criticizing the speeches and the demands of M.H.M.Ashraff. Somahimi Thero Vs Ashraff public debate was challenging one and Ashraff able to win the Thero. Sinhalese always criticized Ashraff's demands and shares in the ministries as over expecting. At his last journey too, Ashraff had given a report to the journalists as "I will defeat People's Alliance in Digamadulla district" (*Daily News*, 2006, September 17:1). Therefore, we can assume that since Ashraff was a threat to the majority, they were trying to undermine his political power by dividing the party. Until Ashraff led the party, they could not do anything to Ashraff and to the SLMC. However, after his demise, they easily achieved what they were expecting for a decade. It was evident that Mrs.Feriel Ashraff had extended her support to the People's Alliance to form government when President Kumarathunge met her personally while the other wing of the SLMC was surprising after the 2000 general election. The result was the separation of two wings of the SLMC and joined with the two extreme political corners in 2004 general election. We can interpret the further splits of the SLMC due to the further influence of the Sinhala factors.

Tamil Factors

The emergence of SLMC was a response to the ethnic conflict and ethnic politics in Sri Lanka. When the civil war threaten the lives, rights and properties of the Muslim community in the Northern and the Eastern provinces, and when they major political parties, politicians and the political authorities became failure to protect them, the SLMC emerged as a separate ethnic party as a safeguard to the Muslim community. Thereafter, the SLMC voiced for he affects of the Muslims due to the ethnic conflict and civil war. When the Northern and the Eastern provinces were merged after the Indo-Lanka Accord, the SLMC advocated for the autonomy for Muslims in the North-East. And in the due cause, it achieved more political representation and political power and became to influence in the national politics. All these events and development of the SLMC were viewed by Tamil freedom fighters as a thread to their nationalism and civil war, to achieve a separate state for Tamils. From the emergence of the SLMC, the LTTE was against its movements questioned the politics on separate identity. When the SLMC conducted its active politics in the Muslims areas; the LTTE reacted in a violent ways in these areas. The innocent Muslims were killed and their properties were destroyed by the LTTE. Furthermore, they forcefully evacuated the traditional Muslims of a province (Northern) from their home land without any resources.⁸The LTTE had attempted to kill the SLMC leader, M.H.M.Ashraff, and destroy the party, many times. It named Ashraff in its list of persons who were against their separation movements and want to be killed. It was criticized by the activists of the SLMC that the LTTE played a vital role in the killing of M.H.M.Ashraff. However, after the demise of M.H.M.AShraff, the LTTE had a close relationship with the second leadership of the SLMC, as a political strategy. It invited the SLMC for a friendly negotiation soon after the Ceasefire agreement signed in 2002 and made an agreement with the SLMC leader. The So-called Praba-Hakeem agreement⁹ nothing done for the Muslim community in the North-East rather it paved way for the further killings, abduction and destroy of properties of the Muslims. This friendship and the agreement were criticized within the party too. The LTTE never placed the Muslims as an equal partner in the peace process. It further strongly undermined the separate delegation of Muslims in the negotiation tables. It never accepted the Muslim autonomy unit in the resolution package. It is testimony that one group of the SLMC under the leadership of A.L.M.Athallah who mostly criticized Rauff Hakeem relationship with the LTTE moved from the SLMC and formed another Muslim party and advocated for the de-merger of the Northern and the Eastern provinces which was viewed by the LTTE as a challenge to their long-term demand of integrated North-Eastern Motherland.

Foreign Factors

Foreign factors may also influenced in the break-up of the SLMC. Because, foreign powers need parties from Tamil and Muslim communities to look at their interests in Sri Lanka which may also influenced in the split of SLMC. The political process and the rapid growth of parties emerged from the SLMC are justifying the argument. When we ask a question that from where they are getting money for their colorful political process? Is it from their members or beneficiaries? It is difficult to answer.

The impacts of the Break-up of the SLMC

There were many impacts due to the break-up of the SLMC in the Muslim as well as the national politics. Some of the major impacts are analyzed below in details.

Emergence of more minor parties within Muslim politics

The break-up of the SLMC led to the emergence of more minor parties with the interest of representing Muslim community. After the demise of M.H.M.Ashraff, it became to spit into two when two persons named as its co-leaders. However, co-leadership did not continue more than six month. These two groups fought each other in the interest of achieving the national leadership. At a time they went the court and the court decided them to act one person as SLMC leader and the other one as the leader of National Unity Alliance (thereafter NUA). From that point, the NUA led by Mrs.Feriel Ashraff, began to separate completely from the SLMC and supported the People's Alliance led by President Kumaratunge without any conditions. Later, opposing the leadership of the SLMC, some member of Parliaments with their supporters left the SLMC in 2004. Minister Athaullah and his followers formed the National Muslim Congress (now National congress) and the Parliamentarian (later Minister) Rishad Badi-ud-Din formed All Ceylon Muslim Congress. Later Hafish Naseer formed Democratic Unity Alliance (DUA) and Maulavi Mubarack formed Ulama Party. More than six parties representing a small (in number) and scattered Muslims with other major parties and all are advocating that they are following the path of the founder leader of the SLMC, MHM.Ashraff. However, we can look at that there are two lines in political alliance -alliance with the UNP and the Alliance with the United People Freedom Alliance.

In fact, they have confronted with the government decisions in the matter of Muslim rights and interest. No consensus has been built among these parties in any matter touching with the interest of Muslim community. It clearly indicates the fragmentation of Muslim politics.

Question of Muslims' representation

At present, the Muslim politics in Sri Lanka have more so-called parliament representations. 23 Muslim Members of Parliament are there in Sri Lankan parliament. 04 elected from SLMC list. 04 nominated from the SLMC and its coalition party, the UNP. Five are with government side and 03 are with the opposition coalition. Tamil National Alliance nominated one. Two are representing the Peoples Liberation Front (JVP). Others are representing the UPFA. However, it is a big question whether they represent Muslim community? And who represent the ideals of the SLMC. In fact, since most of them have elected or nominated from other parties than the SLMC, they have to represent the ideals of the other parties. Then another question arise –who is the leader of Sri Lanka Muslim community?. The Sri Lankan Muslim can't answer this question. Traditionally the ministers in the successive government have been identifies as the leaders of Sri Lankan Muslims. However, with the emergence of distinct Muslim party, the SLMC and a charismatic leadership, MHM.Ashraff within the ideal of Islamic foundation, the party and the leader have raised and recognized as the leader or sole representative of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. This situation continued even after the SLMC made alliance with the People's Alliance Government in 1994. A shadow or cold war was going on there within the government in the matter of recognizing the leadership for Muslims within the government. However, Ashraff could able to dominate the governments and the political environment. At present, since the Muslim politics has been fragmented, it is difficult to identify a politician as the leader of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. This was mainly criticized during the peace process in Sri Lanka. This will be the major challenge for the Muslim community in its future endeavors.

Question of Muslims' voice

When Ashraff led the SLMC it was identified as Muslim voice within and outside of Sri Lanka. After his demise, all Muslim Members of Parliaments and the Muslim ministers are justifying that they have voiced for the Muslim community however, when the Muslim community faces challenges with regards to their rights and privileges all are being silent. Tsunami Housing Scheme in Nuraichcholai, Akkaraippattu, Land issues of Muslim in the North-East, Settlements of majority communities in Muslims' traditional lands, issues with regard to Muslim identity are some of the issues where the Muslim community expecting sound voices from its leaders. Even though, the civil society institutions also have dumped and undermined to voice in these issues.

Question of Muslims' autonomy

There is a political history of the demand for autonomy for Muslims in the North-East. SLMC advocated the demand for the sake of Muslim community. (Mohideen, 1987; Mohideen, 2002; Siddeque, 1987; Fousar, 1997; Shegu Issadeen, 2006) But today, all Muslim parties, except the SLMC (to some extent) are silent on the matter of Muslim autonomy in the East. Others are happy with the government decision of sharing central power to the provinces. And they advocate for it too. However, in the discourse of resolving ethnic conflict through sharing powers to regions or to the minorities, the author of this research also insist the important of creating an autonomy unit for the sake of Muslim community in Sri Lanka. The model or the arrangement powers within the unit can be discussed later.

Impact on Civil society – weaken and fragmented

During the apex of the Muslim distinct politics the Muslim civil society was fertilized with the political influence of the SLMC and its leadership. Even at the early period of the demise of the SLMC leader, the Muslim civil society could advocate the rightful rights and demands of the Muslim community. It is noted that the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka was able to mobilize Muslim community and raise its voice. The Oluvil Declaration of 2003 is one of the testimonies for it. However, at present there is no coordination and corporation among the Muslim civil society institutions. South Eastern University is now controlled by the police and military personals¹⁰ and the activities of the undergraduates are suppressed. As mentioned earlier, all civil society institutions are now dumped and undermined. Further the Muslim community does not have any strong media for voice the issues that Muslim community having faced.

Decline of political bargaining

During the apex of the SLMC politics, its founder leader, M.H.M.Ashraff could able to bargain with a limited political support (only 7 members at parliaments) and able to gain more benefits and rightful share of resources for the sake of Muslim community. He bargained for two powerful ministries- Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, and the Ministry of Ports and Shipping and two more deputy ministries with powerful positions and allocations. Further, he could able to bargain in cadre positions, and resource allocation of other ministries and departments. But after his demise, even though the political power has been increased to the SLMC or to the parties originated from the SLMC, and even most of the Muslim parliamentarians of the above parties are being as Ministers and Deputies, most of them are act as so-called ministers and most of the ministers don't know their positions within the ministries because of more than one

ministers for the same ministries. No ministry is chaired by one Minister which the so-called NC+NUA+ACMC ministers are holding.

The position of Muslim ministers within the government is controlled and they are not in a position to bargain for the sake of their community. In fact, most of the Muslim ministers in the government side are somersault MPs from SLMC and supported the government by undermining the interest of people elected them.

Negligence of Muslims' Interests

Due to the break-up of the SLMC, the Muslims' rights and interest have been neglected by the governments and the majorities. During the peace process, when Muslims insisted the equal participation of the Muslims in the peace talks, it was criticized and ignored by the Tamil and Sinhalese politicians and the LTTE. When the Muslims community faced many challenges due to the CFA, no site supported the Muslim to protect them. When the Muslim community severely affected by the 2004 Asian Tsunami, reconstruction of the destructions they faced was mainly neglected and still they are facing challenges to return their homes. When the Muslim community faced challenges to poster their separate identity and practice their religious obligations, no one came forward to raise their voices to protect their distinct identity. In all these matters, even the so-called Muslim MPs and the ministers have also not paid their attention.

Question of Muslims' future

Due to the break-up of the SLMC, which was viewed as a strong force in the national politics and the guardian of Muslim politics, numbers of impact caused the Muslim politics. Therefore, an uncertain, dark political future has been created before the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, particularly, before the Eastern Muslim.

Conclusions

There is a tradition and history for the Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. The politics of the traditional Muslims was viewed as neutral and patriotic one. Therefore, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka had been attracted by the majority people and the local rulers. However, when the ethnic conflict turned as a civil war, the communal harmony became question and the ethnic based politics became to emerge. The emergence of the SLMC has come to make a paradigm shift in the traditional Muslim politics. Further, the SLMC played an influencing role and also made tremendous impacts in the Muslim and national politics of Sri Lanka. The charismatic leadership of the SLMC founder leader, M.H.M.Ashraff played a vital role in all success of the SLMC.

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The sudden demise of the SLMC founder leader caused many impacts in the Muslims politics as well as national politics. As seen above, the SLMC became fragmented and many small parties became to emerge. It further created two lines in the Muslim politics. Muslims rights and development of socio-economic conditions are became questioned. The influence and the bargaining power of the Muslim politics also became declined. It is public opinion and suspicious of the minorities that the nationalist politics of Sinhalese further trying to undermine the political powers and the identity of the minorities in Sri Lanka. Therefore, since an uncertain future has been created for the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, it is the responsibility of the Muslim politicians of the SLMC and the other Muslim parties to consider the future of the Muslim community and unite for the sake of Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

Notes

1. In fact, the SLMC emerged as a political movement in 1981 by M.H.M.Ashraff in Kattankudy, a prominent Muslim village in the Batticaloa district under the chairmanship of Ahamed Lebbei, the chairman of Kattankudy Town council.
2. The Tamil-Muslim clash started in the middle of 1985 in from Akkraipattthu, a prominent Muslim village in the Amparai district, close to a Tamil village.
3. The SLMC contested at the general election in 1989 under its tree symbol and gained four representations at its first parliament election within a short period of its emergence.
4. Within the PA government, he was a prominent cabinet member. He also one of the prominent members in the constitutional experts who were in-charged for the drafting of new constitution under the PA government. He is the one who started the debate and advocated the draft constitution of 2000 for three hours.
5. South Eastern University formed as tenth university of Sri Lanka. Initially it formed as a University College in October 1995 and upgraded to the national university stage in 1996.
6. The Muslim National Revival conference was organized and announced the Oluvil Declaration by the University community in 29th January 2003 in responding to the Ponku Tamil events and the continuous negligence of the Muslims interests in the peace process.
7. Ashraff was killed in a Helicopter clash near Aranayake hill site, Kegalla, while he traveling to East (Amparai) for the first election campaign in the 2000 general election.
8. Nearly 75 thousands of the Northern Muslims were forcefully evacuated within three days.
9. This negotiation and agreement held in Vanni area on 13th April 2002.
10. South Eastern University has a police post consisting of 40 police personals including an ASP. Further it has an army camp where around 60 army personals are putting post in the East coast of the university. This was created due to the death treat to the Sinhala students in 2008.

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Biographical Note

Mr. S.M. Aliff has been working as a Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Currently he is functioning as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Culture.
