

## OPINION

# Tamil-Muslim unity crucial for peace

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SRI LANKA'S six-decade old ethnic tension between the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese negatively affected both the island's socio-economic progress and ethnic harmony.

This essay, however, attempts to examine relations between the Tamils and the Muslims, particularly the Eastern Muslims and to emphasise the importance of a truth-and-ethnic-reconciliation approach to build unity between these groups.

The Muslims live all throughout the island "in small communities," and maintain smooth ethnic cohabitation with the Sinhalese for some obvious political and trade objectives. However, they claim they are the majority in the Amparai district of the Eastern province, where exist social and political tension between the Tamils and the Muslims. The Northern and Eastern Muslims became victims of a vicious cycle of ethnic instability that led to the ethnic civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Muslims of the North and East now claim that they have some special problems and seek solutions to their grievances.

## The Tamil-Muslim divide

In Sri Lanka, politicians emotionalize ethnic relations. There had been a trend in the Sinhala political establishment since S.W. R. D. Bandaranaike's time to effectively ethnicize the political system and relations between different ethnic groups and to outbid opponents on an anti-Tamil platform. The politicization of ethnic emotions by southern parties failed the country and eventually drove the Tamils and the Sinhalese into a gory ethnic civil war.

The political establishment of the Muslims supports the Sinhala political leaders for political and commercial purposes: they vigorously oppose the Tamil demand for self-autonomy in the merged North and East and support successive Sinhala-dominated governments' military actions against the Tamils.

A notable feature of the Tamil-Muslim relations in contemporary Sri Lanka is the Muslim desire to develop a non-Tamil identity based on Islam, a religion which strictly calls obedience only to Allah, a profound message that relentlessly resists any forms of obedience to all other powers.

The Muslims' decision to seek their own identity based on Islam triggered Tamil anger, but the Muslims primarily blame the Tamils for their disinterest in the wider Tamil identity: the Tamil threat for the Muslim existence cited as the key factor.

This goes back to the period of Ponnambalam Ramanathan who attempted to integrate the Muslims into a wider Tamil com-



A highpoint of Tamil-Muslim relations in Sri Lanka was the signing of a memorandum of understanding between SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem and LTTE leader Velupillai Pirapaharan in April 2002, but the momentum has not been maintained

munity, arguing that the Muslims were but Tamils converted to Islam.

Also, the political position of Muslim elites concerning their interests and aspirations directed the Muslims, who speak Tamil, to develop a distinct ethnic identity based on Islam. Besides, the Muslims have fears that a unified northern and eastern province or the ethnic Tamil state aspired to by Tamil nationalists would not protect the interests of the Muslims. This paved the way for what I call the security crisis.

The Northern Muslims were expelled by the LTTE from Jaffna in October 1990. More than 100 Muslims from Kattankudy were killed inside a mosque on August 3, 1990, and land and properties of Muslims were robbed, particularly in the Batticaloa and Amparai districts. All of which goes to show that the irrational approach of the Tamil resistance movement towards the Muslims of the North and East was the key component of the Muslim frustration, and thus some (affected) Muslim youth eventually resorted to violence against the Tamils and joined the state security forces, either as low-level cadres or as informants.

The question is, 'why did the Tamils target the Muslims?' One theory points to the collaboration of Muslim political leaders in the South with the Sinhala political class since the mid 1930s and '40s. The Muslim political class' outright rejection of the fifty-fifty demand, which was the brainchild of G. G. Ponnambalam, their deep distrust in S.J.V. Chelvanayakam's federal demand, their opposition to the separate state demand of the Tamil resistance movement contributed to the growth of Tamil anger towards the Muslims.

Moreover, Muslim political leaders supported the Sinhala-only policy, and the subsequent university admission policies that were clearly detrimental to Tamil interests. During the 1983 riots, a Muslim Minister is said to have disgraced Islam by unleashing his thugs in central Colombo against the Tamils. The Muslims of the Eastern Province were alleged to have got together with the STF in terrorist exploits against the Tamils there.

## Why unity?

Both the Tamils and the Muslims have been facing common challenges and problems. Since independence, the Sinhala politicians and leaders formulated policies aimed at weakening the interests and status of the minorities, and strengthening the unitary state structure, a kind of political symbol of the Sinhalese.

The bottom line is that the minorities in Sri Lanka have some special problems. These problems are associated with the issues of identity and existence, and thus they need special solutions.

The fact is that the problems of the minorities would not generate some reasonable attention and human solution from the Sinhala political class as long as these communities distrust one another.

## Towards unity

Unity between the Tamils and the Muslims is the key to gain justice and peace from the Sinhala ruling class. However, ethnic reconciliation would not occur among the conflicting groups at the masses level unless attempts at elite level help build a bridge to increase confidence and trust both at masses and elites level.

## Tamil role

The Tamils need to recognize the Muslims' desire to seek a non-Tamil identity. They must allay Muslim fears vis-à-vis the merger and power-sharing. LTTE initiatives such as an apology for Muslim expulsion from the Northern Province in 1990, and permission for resettlement, the return of the lands forcibly taken from the Eastern Muslims and negotiations with the Muslim civil society organizations such as North East Muslim Peace Assembly could contribute to building some trust between the Tamils and Muslims.

The Muslims of the East can overcome their fears to some extent if there is consistency in Tamil efforts to arrest Tamil domination. The Muslims of the North and East claim they have some special problems pertaining to their ethnic identity and security, and expect these issues to be discussed at the negotiating table by their own representatives with the major stakeholders -- the government and the LTTE. The point is that since the Muslims seek a non-Tamil ethnic identity, "they wish to be represented clearly and solely on the basis of their own interests whether or not those interests converge with the interests of the Government and the LTTE, and that is what they are asking for"

## Muslim role

The Muslim politicians' demand for a separate representation at the peace negotiations has an ethnic logic. But that logic would not produce any political legitimacy when the Muslims refuse to give voice for a political solution that aims to go beyond the unitary state structure. The political choices and positions of

the Muslims antagonized the Tamils.

It is the responsibility of the Muslim politicians and activists not to feed the Muslim masses with ethnic hatred. They must build a civic political movement to demand power-sharing beyond the unitary state structure.

The problems between the Muslims and the Tamils should be sorted out through a truth and reconciliation approach. Let each side acknowledge the wrongs done to the other. This is the necessary prelude to the reconciliation, without which ethnic harmony will never be restored. Let neither side think of itself purely as the victim of the other's action..

## Road to peace

Both Tamil and Muslim groups are sensitive to their group symbols. These symbols work vigorously at the masses' level, particularly among the economically and socially weakened sections. The mission to weaken the energy of symbols is not impossible. This requires sincere human effort to seek a future of hope and amity, energy to vigorously challenge the nature of symbols that push members of the group to classify the ethnic and the religious 'others' as an enemy or bad group. These efforts should be backed by a truth and reconciliation process. In other words, the road to peace can be opened if the desire for harmony dominates among the subcultures both at elite and masses level.

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