

**IS THE CURE WORSE THAN  
THE DISEASE?**

**REFLECTIONS ON COVID GOVERNANCE IN  
SRI LANKA**

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# Ethno-centric pandemic governance: The Muslim community in Sri Lanka's COVID response

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## Introduction

“Epidemics can potentially create a medical version of the Hobbesian nightmare – the war of all against all.” (Strong, 1990, p. 258) This strange sense of ‘epidemic psychology’ portrays the situation as posing an immediate threat, either actual or potential, to public order. This was quite evident in the context of the pandemic in Sri Lanka, wherein the state’s ethnocratic<sup>1</sup> system of governance (Balasundaram, 2016) was directed towards the Muslim community in particular, in the form of undue scrutiny, stigmatisation, and discrimination. “Classically associated with this epidemic of irrationality, fear and suspicion, there comes close in its train an epidemic stigmatisation both of those with the disease and of those who belong to what are feared to be the main carrier groups. This can begin with avoidance, segregation and abuse...

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1 ‘Ethnocracy’ refers to a system of governance run largely based on ethnic calculations; this could be at elections, in policy making, or when handling emergencies.

Personal fear may be translated into collective witch-hunts.” (Ibid, p. 253) This sense of ‘othering’ was widely prevalent throughout the pandemic from contact tracing to the disposal of those deceased of COVID-19 who were of Islamic faith, which not only helped with diverting the public’s attention from the government’s inefficiency in managing the crisis, but also helped to reinforce and even intensify existing prejudices against the Muslim community for mere political advantage. As such, the pandemic in itself created the perfect backdrop for the government to continue its ethnocentric, anti-democratic system of governance with impunity.

This chapter provides an overview of how crucial aspects of the government’s pandemic response facilitated a further polarisation of ethnic groups in the country, exacerbating prevailing inequalities within society. The chapter draws on a national poll conducted by Social Indicator, the survey research arm of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, in combination with field visits and qualitative content analyses.

## The pandemic and the public psyche

The President and his associates on multiple occasions proclaimed their confidence and strength in dealing with the health crisis by drawing parallels between it and fighting a war. During an interview on the COVID-19 crisis in Sri Lanka aired by a leading television channel in the country, the Commander of the Sri Lankan Army, Chief of Defence Staff, and head of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 outbreak (NOCPCO), General Shavendra Silva reiterated the strength of the tri-forces and the confidence the President (and public) has in it, to beat the COVID-19 outbreak just as ‘successfully’ as it did ‘defeating’ terrorism in 2009 (*Full-Video of Army Commander speaks to Indeeewari Amuwatte on battle against COVID-19 @HydePark*, 2020). The government’s approach to addressing the pandemic spearheaded by military personnel created a notion that the virus was an enemy that had to be defeated. The strategy used was discipline to flatten the curve. Persons who the state claimed to not have obeyed this order, i.e. either violated COVID-19 restrictions or questioned the

government, were humiliated in public (*Sri Lanka investigates troops over 'humiliation' of Muslims*, 2021). Framing the pandemic, which is essentially a public health crisis, as an issue of national security of a military nature was an assertion that was commonly exploited by those in power. Rather than initiating a civilian-led process with the supervision and direction particularly of the medical fraternity, there were multiple calls for 'obedience' as opposed to fact-based awareness measures, and appeals for 'patriotism' as opposed to solidarity when responding to the pandemic.

Whilst pandemics could strengthen social cohesion and compassion towards one another, they could also create extreme forms of social division wherein some groups are used as scapegoats, leading to their victimisation; this invariably creates a sense of social disorder within the community (Reicher and Stott, 2020). In this connection, it is noticeable how the suppression of civil liberties (via widespread surveillance and intimidation), circumventing processes and mechanisms of democratic accountability and transparency in the name of expediency in responding to an emergency, and the need to rally behind a strong leader against what is essentially an existential threat have been put to use as commonplace tropes to justify a particularly anti-democratic style of governance in Sri Lanka. This has largely altered the public psyche towards a more defensive, as opposed to a more empathetic, approach to those victimised by the virus – which has also fed into the vicious ethno-centric electoral calculus. The fear and anxiety thus amplified are craftily used by the newly elected political force and their allied media institutions to steer public support in favour of systematic and institutionalised discrimination. Mainstream media, a source of information to many about the pandemic, are used as an effective tool to stigmatise and stifle the rights of particularly the Muslim community, the main scapegoats of the novel virus.

Nationalistic rhetoric against calls to permit burials of persons of Islamic faith who died of COVID-19 was an opportune moment to rekindle the infamous 'one law - one country' slogan. Muslims were portrayed to be the trouble makers and made to be objects of public stigmatisation and targets of discrimination – a notion

that has continued with particular vigour since the Easter Sunday terror attacks of April 2019. Their faith, values, and culture were the ‘collateral damage’ of the so-called ‘war against the pandemic’. To better appreciate the framework within which this anti-Muslim rhetoric comes into life, it may be instructive to take brief account of the steady build-up of such sentiments in post-war Sri Lanka.

## Dynamics of ethno-religious governance in post-war Sri Lanka

The conclusion of armed hostilities in 2009 gave rise to a sense of triumphalism (Kumarasinghe, 2016) with a keen emphasis on the need to protect the Sinhala Buddhist identity (*New party aims to safeguard Sinhala identity*, 2016). The growing disappointment among the Sinhala- Buddhist community, particularly in relation to escalating economic distresses and the claim that Muslims monopolise economic gain (Kadirgamar, 2013), enabled nationalistic political forces to reclaim their lost appeal and facilitate a recurrence of violence (Zuhair, 2016). Politically, the rise of nationalistic political parties like Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), followed by ultra nationalist ethno-religious groups like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya, and Ravana Balaya fuelled an ethno-nationalist narrative, which unfolded with great impunity due to direct or indirect state patronage, validating growing nationalistic sentiments and perceived insecurities among the majority community (*Sri Lanka: Preliminary findings of Country Visit to Sri Lanka by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, 2019).

Despite a rich history of democratic politics and a sound legal framework which protects religious freedom, a combination of trends including racism, violent xenophobia, islamophobia, racial slurs, and hate speech directed against the Muslims ensued in post-war Sri Lanka. This culminated in widespread communal violence on multiple occasions. Although the *Yahapalanaya* regime in 2015 pledged to strengthen fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, it failed to curb the recurring violence against minority communities and enforce legal action against perpetrators responsible for ethno-religious disharmony in the country. This further enabled

nationalistic and radical forces to roam with impunity, escalating the antagonism between the majority and minority communities (*President pardons Gnanasara Thero*, 2019; Mayberry, 2019).

Claims that Muslims were taking control of the country's economy and altering the demographics with their rapid population growth, and that they were contaminating and poisoning Sinhalese Buddhists via implanting dangerous substances in food, clothes, and material that could affect the fertility of the majority community, as well as charges of infertility procedures by Muslim professionals were a few of the varying allegations that triggered violent responses against the minority community. The Easter Sunday terrorist attacks – a rampage that took place in April 2019, killing more than 260 mostly Christian worshippers, and wounding many more – fed into the existing resentment against the Muslim community, and further alienated it from not just the majority, but other minority communities (such as Sinhalese Catholics) as well.

Campaigning on a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist platform that proposed a mandate for 'Vistas, Prosperity and Splendour', the Rajapaksa-led SLPP bloc secured a resounding victory in both the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, with a clear majority voting in favour of the incumbent President and his representatives (Srinivasan, 2019; *Sri Lanka election: Rajapaksa brothers win 'super-majority'*, 2020). The election win was reflective of a deeply divided society with unprecedented support from the ethnic majority Sinhalese, whilst Tamil and Muslim voters overwhelmingly rejected the SLPP (Thiruvarangan, 2020). The SLPP capitalised on the Easter Sunday terror attacks to effectively portray the need for a strong, overpowering leader that prioritised national security over everything else (*Gotabaya named as SLPP's presidential candidate*, 2019).

Added to this was the intensification of anti-democratic vigour with little concern for democratic forms of governance as was evidenced when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved Parliament during the height of the pandemic and established a range of task forces with no Parliamentary oversight or accountability. These task forces primarily headed by the military were given the powers

to lead the mitigation process of COVID-19, introduce measures for poverty eradication, support livelihood development, facilitate economic revival, and preserve archeological heritage, to name a few (*Sri Lankan Parliament dissolved; elections set for April, 2020; The appointment of the two presidential task forces, 2020*).

The Rajapaksas' wasted no time in proclaiming their agenda to strengthen Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony in the wake of their electoral victory. The President followed by the Prime Minister took their oaths at scared Buddhist temples to reaffirm the primacy of Buddhist cultural heritage. A Buddhist Advisory Council was constituted on the invitation of the President, to meet on the third Friday of every month, so as to provide advice and views of the Maha Sangha in the implementation of policies of the government (*Buddhist Advisory Council commends President for walking the talk, 2020*). It is in this context that the COVID-19 pandemic struck Sri Lanka in the first quarter of 2020.

## The Muslim community and the pandemic

During a political interview aired on a pro-government news channel, with both ruling and opposition members of Parliament in April 2020, racial and derogatory slurs against the Muslim community were used both statistically (falsely) and rhetorically by the government ministers present, as well as by the host of the interview, which not only highlighted the animosity against the community, and reflected subscription to the false claims of Muslims being an existential threat to society as a whole (*Derana TV Chathura's double standards exposed: citizens enraged over racist slurs of Derana TV anchor, 2020*), but also denoted the role of the media in facilitating this form of racist behaviour. The notion that Muslims were the 'super spreaders' of the corona virus was first objectified during a television interview by the head of the NOCPCO which was aired at the very initial stages of the pandemic (early March 2020). He specifically indicated that persons from Puttlam (an area predominantly consisting of Muslims) had the highest number of persons returning from overseas territories who avoided registering themselves at the local police stations. He claimed that whilst they

were infected with the virus, they lacked discipline and roamed around spreading the virus to many in the area, and as a result indefinite curfew was forced to be declared in Puttlam (ibid). Following the complete lockdown of Puttlam, similar claims were made in relation to Akurana in the Kandy district and Atalugama in the Kalutara district – both predominantly consisting of Muslim communities (*Sri Lanka extends indefinite curfew to Kandy and Puttlam, Akurana under lockdown*, 2020).

The government, which underplayed the severity of the virus initially and later failed to respond to the public health crisis swiftly and efficiently, had to scapegoat the Muslim community in order to deviate attention from their failures in aptly mitigating the public health crisis. Specific references to rates of infection identified within the Muslim community, villages, or locations were highlighted in daily reporting on pro-government media channels. The perception that the community was flouting quarantine regulations and thereby spreading the virus was a notion that had to be held on to and deviously documented. This was further reiterated by a resident from Atolugama when speaking about his experience and dilemmas faced during the second wave of the pandemic.

My village was cordoned off by army and STF personnel following a claim by a doctor from the Bandaragama district hospital who has a private clinic in the area. The doctor assumed that the village could be infected by COVID-19 due to many with flu like symptoms consulting him. What was strange was that various media institutions accompanied the large groups of military personnel that surged into my village. We were dumbstruck and intimidated at the same time; we couldn't fathom what was going on. People were dragged out of their homes by force. To those who protested, questioned authority, or locked themselves indoors due to fear of being attacked, angry threats of feeding pork were made if instructions were not followed. Batches of residents from my village were taken for PCR testing either voluntarily or by force – approximately 1080 persons were sent to quarantine centres in Jaffna, Bandarawela, Batticaloa, and Beruwala. There were about 40-50 of us loaded into one bus. We were not allowed to open the windows. We were kept like this for nearly three hours before the journey commenced to our respective quarantine centres. All of

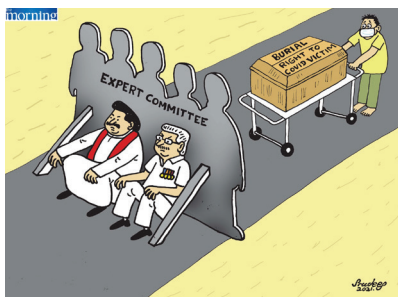


this was perfectly documented by media personnel at the scene who eagerly waited to watch everything unfold. Although the authorities claimed that residents from my village tested positive for COVID-19, none of us had access to our test results. Some among us had given details for PCR testing, but were not subject to any form of PCR or antigen tests. We were told, including those who did not do any PCR or antigen tests, that we had been tested positive for COVID-19 and were sent to quarantine centres. Most of us who were sent to quarantine struggled to find our way back home after the 14 days, as transport back home was not provided. Most in my village are daily wage earners. This was a costly journey back home to many among us, as private vehicles for hire were scarce during the time – and rates that many charged us back home were very high. For two and a half months we were under complete lockdown. Our village was surrounded by the military and cordoned off. We were provided with state assistance twice by way of an allowance of Rs. 5000/= for each family and a package of essentials which consisted of outdated food items.<sup>2</sup>

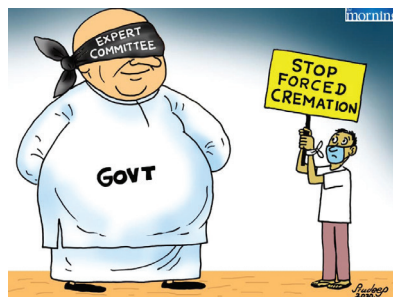
In ethnocracies, the state apparatus is controlled by the dominant ethnic group, and policies that are implemented by the state largely favour the dominant ethnic group, disregarding other minority groups in society. This was glaringly evident when various state institutions implicitly and explicitly encouraged and spearheaded anti-Muslim propaganda in the guise of battling the COVID-19 crisis so as to appease the majority. A classic example for this is also highlighted in the memes reproduced below that were circulated on social media and detailed thereafter, wherein the mandatory cremation policy enforced by the government in relation to persons who died of COVID-19 was skillfully manipulated for the consumption of the majority population.

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<sup>2</sup> Discussion with small scale businessman from Atolugama, Bandaragama (virtual), 18 June 2021.



Source: Cartoonist Pradeep, 2021



Source: Cartoonist Pradeep, 2020

The Health guidelines issued by Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health following a gazette notification on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 echoed views similar to the WHO health guidelines in relation to the disposal of those who die of COVID-19. However, notwithstanding the guidelines that allowed for burial, following the first death of a person who was of Islamic faith, authorities forcefully cremated the victim despite the family's continuous objections. Later on that day, the health guidelines were amended to allow only cremation, which was further followed by an official mandatory cremation policy on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. With over 190 countries allowing burial of persons who died of COVID-19 under specified health guidelines, Sri Lanka remained an outstanding nation that implemented a mandatory cremation policy for nearly a year without any sound scientific evidence.

Cremation of the dead goes against Islamic teachings of dignified burials. The mandatory cremation policy did not only deprive Muslims of their basic religious rights, but also contributed to the widespread perception that Muslims' religious practices aid the spread of the virus. The smear campaign against Muslims heightened with calls on the government to retract the ban on burials of persons who died of COVID-19. Debates in this regard took an anti-Muslim turn that justified the mandatory cremation policy issued by the government. The voices of scientists and medical professionals in the field who advocated for the need to follow WHO guidelines – as mandatory cremation had no scientific base – were sidelined and denied due publicity in both print and electronic media aligned with the state.

The chief epidemiologist along with many politicians in power claimed that based on the opinion of an ‘expert’ committee, the composition and qualifications of which remain unknown, burial of COVID-19 bodies would increase the risk of communicable disease by contamination of ground water. These claims were not supported by any form of scientific evidence but were strongly repeated to anyone who questioned the policy. . What was more bizarre was the fact that cremation often took place immediately upon notification of test results, without allowing family members reasonable time or opportunity to request a verification test. This led to, on many occasions, hospital officials refusing continuous pleas by families of the deceased to conduct a second test for complete verification. Families of the deceased were forced to sign papers authorising the cremation of their loved ones, whilst also not being allowed to view their body (*Coronavirus funerals: Sri Lanka’s Muslims decry forced cremation*, 2020).

Dr. Channa Perera, a Consultant Forensic Pathologist attached to Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Health in an interview with the BBC World Service went to the extent of saying that the “government has nothing against Muslims but they have a small fear about whether the virus can be used for unauthorised activities. Maybe an unwanted person could get access to a body and it could be used as a biological weapon.” (*Small fear whether the dead bodies with the virus can be used as biological weapons*, 2020) To further support this claim, leading state sector academics advocated for the compulsory cremation policy imposed by the state. A strong advocate for the compulsory cremation policy imposed by the state was Prof Meththika Vithanage from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura where she argued that viruses in buried cadavers can contaminate the ground water. Although there were grave errors and contradictions in these claims of contamination of ground water, these were given a lot of publicity in order to maintain that the policy had a scientific base (*CCPSL says no solid evidence indicating burial of COVID-19 victims increases spread of virus*, 2021; *Sri Lanka can bury COVID-19 victims: SLMA*, 2021; Marsoof, 2020).

False propaganda led by the state and supported by various leading academics and epidemiologists then found resonance in the collective psyche of many Sinhalese, as well as other non-Muslim communities. According to the survey, a majority among the Sinhala, Tamil, and Up-Country Tamil communities are of the view that cultural/ religious practices of some religious groups could be a cause for a higher possibility of the spread of COVID-19. Among those who oppose this, most are from the Muslim community. Furthermore, on fair treatment during the pandemic, it is mostly respondents from the Muslim community, in comparison to respondents from the Sinhala, Tamil, and Up-Country Tamil communities, who felt that the government's COVID-19 rules (guidelines) were unfairly implemented in relation to different ethnic groups in society ('Socio-Economic Index in the face of COVID-19', 2021).

The College of Community Physicians of Sri Lanka (*CCPSL says...*, 2021) and the Sri Lanka Medical Association issued statements (*Sri Lanka can bury...*, 2021) clarifying that there has been no proof that burial of COVID-19 dead bodies constitutes a public health hazard. World-renowned Pathologist and Virologist Professor Malik Peiris (*World renowned virologist Prof. Malik Peiris refutes claims that burials transmit COVID-19*, 2020), currently serving as the Chair Professor of the Department of Virology at the University of Hong Kong who is also a leading scientist who discovered the virus that causes SARS, questioned the theory of compulsory cremation stating that "Covid-19 is not a waterborne disease.... and I haven't seen any evidence to suggest it spreads through dead bodies. A virus can only multiply in a living cell. Once a person dies the ability of the viruses to multiply decreases... Dead bodies aren't buried right in running water. Once you bury the body six feet under wrapped in impermeable wrapping, it is highly unlikely it would contaminate running water."

Although there were many protests staged against the discriminatory policies implemented by the government during the pandemic, there were also many limitations to them due to travel embargos. Although it was quite obvious that the government was playing the racist card and institutionalising discrimination amidst the pandemic, very little adherence was given to the Muslim

politicians who tried to pressure (Ranawana, 2020) the government's discriminatory policy. Protests went viral on social media forums both locally and internationally, drawing the attention of many Muslim countries globally. The refusal of Sri Lanka's Supreme Court to hear the petitions challenging the discriminatory policy was the tipping point which forced the Muslim community to seek international assistance to find a solution to the issue of forced cremations during the pandemic. UN special rapporteurs wrote to the government in April 2020 and January 2021, urging the government to respect the wishes of those who seek burial, and to recognise that the disregard of Muslims' feelings may lead to more complex issues. It was further highlighted in the 46th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council from February-March 2021, with the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) raising the issue. Sri Lanka was to face a fresh resolution by the UNHRC at its 46th sessions and needed the support of the OIC and its South Asian neighbour Pakistan (*Sri Lanka does away with forced cremations after PM Imran Khan reportedly raises issues*, 2021) which could have been one of the few reasons as to why this ban was revoked (Fonseka and Dissanayake, 2021). Following the lifting of the ban there was no reason provided for the long drawn out argument of the contamination narrative associated with burying deceased persons. Yet, to keep the fires of ethnocentrism burning and evade public uproar against permitting the burial of COVID-deceased persons, burials were permitted in Oddamavadi, a Muslim populated village in the Eastern province.

As already demonstrated, the systematic injustice faced by Muslims during the pandemic was not limited to mainstream or social media, but was extended to institutionalised discrimination embedded in various government policies. This not only impedes on the basic rights of those belonging to minority communities, in this instance the Muslims in particular, but also has crucial implications for coexistence and ethnic harmony as a whole. False propaganda has further contributed to the erosion of trust between communities, which has facilitated a serious deterioration of democratic values within society as a whole, undermining prospects for substantive democracy.

## Conclusion

A combination of the government's war rhetoric and stringent COVID-19 regulations has helped to portray communities who are more vulnerable to the virus as a threat to society, and thereby criminalise those who contract the virus. This sense of victimisation has exacerbated with the military taking control of the COVID response – which in turn considered the victimised as mere 'disposable bodies' in the larger scheme of ethno-nationalism. Ethnic, cultural, and economic minorities have been made to accept policies, rules, and procedures that are purely palatable to the sensibilities of the majority community - couched in the language of 'one country-one law'. In this context, this chapter has demonstrated how the Muslim community has specifically been targeted during the COVID-19 public health crisis in Sri Lanka.

Like their Sinhalese and Tamil counterparts, Muslims too, faced many challenges due to numerous pandemic regulations imposed by the government ostensibly to curtail the spread of the virus. However, in the hands of an ethnocratic state apparatus, the Muslim community was subjected to harsh, humiliating, and unfair implementation of such regulations. The chapter demonstrates that the Muslim community therefore underwent double victimisation in the pandemic governmentality of the Rajapaksa regime, which exposed how deep-rooted ethnocracy in Sri Lanka is. It is noteworthy to point out that endorsement of ethnic-based rationality in devising and implementing pandemic regulations not only came from vote-savvy racist politicians, but many educated academics and senior bureaucrats as well.

Contrary to the popular perception that disasters and calamities bring people together by strengthening social bonding, this chapter shows that the virus as well as the government's response to it have further strained prospects for coexistence, especially with regards to Sinhala-Muslim relations. The Rajapaksa government that came into power by exploiting the anti-Muslim sentiment prevalent at the time, either explicitly or implicitly supported various state and non-state actors who engaged in the government's COVID response

that labeled the Muslim community as a threat to society at large. This resulted in the already strained intercommunity relationships following the Easter Sunday terror attacks to further deteriorate.

Whilst this chapter predominantly highlights the way in which COVID-19 policy-making affected the Muslim community - from a broader perspective what is important to note is the general plight of minorities under regressive forms of governance in a staunchly majoritarian state structure, where not everyone is quite treated as a rights bearing citizen. Although what is needed presently is to learn from the past and establish pluralism and democratic values in governance, the current reality is the near absence of it. What is truly troubling is how the arbitrary and selective application of laws, along with excessive powers vested in the Executive, signal a deeper erosion of democratic foundations within the Sri Lankan society.

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