Islamophobia and Acts of Extremism Against Muslim Minorities in Sri Lanka Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Sri Lanka has witnessed many examples of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence since the end of the civil war, especially in 2014 when an ethnic outbreak affected large numbers of people. Sinhala monks and Buddhists appear to have played an important role in covering it. Long wars and ethnonationalist ideology have resulted in a politico-religious shift related to “Buddhist extremism”, which engages in embracing and attacking Muslims. This study uses the "library research" method, whose main data includes: books, journals, articles, and references related to research. Sriankan Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment manifests itself in several dimensions such as campaigns warning of Halal products in food, Muslim women’s clothing (Burqa), slaughter of livestock in Muslim religious rituals, attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses, and mandatory cremation for all Sri Lankans regardless of religion at the time of the Corona Virus (Covid-19) outbreak, and the closure of Islamic schools.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Extremism, Sri Lanka, Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country where several ethnic, and linguistic groups have lived together for centuries. But that coexistence is not always without tension, and sometimes violence. The current ethnic conflict always involves the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) minority known as the Tamil Tigers which have their roots in British colonial rule from 1815 to 1948 (Perera, 2001). After the civil war, militant Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Urumaya Sinhala, and Rahwana Balaya began to spread Islamophobia discourse and violence, particularly in Aluthgama and Kota Dharga, against the Muslim community that makes up about 10% of Sri Lanka's population (Sivaloganathan, 2017).

After the civil war, anti-Muslim sentiment and violence continued to escalate in various forms, always targeting the ethnic and religious aspects of Islam and their livelihoods. The main anti-Muslim sentiments that have been expressed by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces include hate speech
questioning the history and ethnic origins of Muslims, destruction of places of worship and religious teaching centers, denial of halal certificates on Muslim food and Islamic law (Sharia), against the slaughter of animals, and criticized cultural aspects such as wearing the burqa and closing Islamic schools (Sarjoon, 2016). Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Sri Lankan government run by extremist leaders ordered the cremation of all those who died from Covid-19 regardless of religion.

Although the impact of religious radicalism and violence by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces is clear and has received attention from local and international human rights activists and forums, the Sri Lankan government's response to controlling or stopping violence and anti-minority campaigns have been unsuccessful, particularly against Muslims. In addition, there is still a large gap in terms of taking action against perpetrators of religious violence to ensure tolerance and inter-religious harmony in Sri Lanka.

METHOD

The research approach that the authors used in this study was qualitative research with library research instruments. The research data is qualitative data, namely in the form of descriptions, exposures and writings referred to from sources related to research problems such as: Journals or books or other literature (Mujahidin, 2021). The research method used is descriptive method, namely presenting data in library materials according to relevant studies. The data collection technique used as a tool for collecting data in this study is a documentary technique, namely: data is extracted through documents from various library materials, then analyzed using content analysis. With this technique, qualitative data is sorted, categorized (grouped) with similar data, then the contents are analyzed critically so that a concrete formulation is formulated which is then explained in depth.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The refusal to consume halal food and the labeling of halal certificates on food is a serious threat to Muslims in Sri Lanka after the civil war. One of the main foundations of Islam is its teaching that Muslims are only allowed to consume halal food according to religious law. All Ceylon Jamiatul Ulama (ACJU), the theological body responsible for making key decisions for Sri Lankan Muslims, was given responsibility for monitoring and issuing halal certificates, a move that caused serious problems until BBS started its hate campaign in 2012.
Since then hardline Sinhalese Buddhists have vehemently rejected the use of the halal logo used in food produced at the company and then sold in shops and markets. Although halal is a universal strategy for food producers to attract Muslim consumers, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) group strongly opposes and rejects it on the grounds of incurring additional costs for producers in Sri Lanka. As a result, propaganda against such halal logos led the mainstream Islamic organization All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama (ACJU) to stop issuing halal logo certifications to many food-producing companies and BBS also demanded that shops be cleared of halal meat in April 2013, thus, Campaign This opposition to the halal logo also has economic implications for Sinhalese producers, although some producers are unwilling to incur additional costs for halal certificates for their production (Fowsar, 2020). Coupled with the anti-Islam campaign, slogans, and placards with pictures of pigs written in Arabic letters. This activity is considered to have offended and hurt Muslims in Sri Lanka. In addition, the campaign against halal certification is considered to attack the fundamental identity of Muslims. Many Muslims in the area and elsewhere in Sri Lanka regard the protesters’ actions and demonstrations as part of global Islamophobia (Saleem, 2015).

As time goes by, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) turned from a group into a mass movement by engaging the wider Sri Lankan population in their ultra-nationalist endeavors. In its propaganda campaign, BBS falsely demonstrates to the public that it has tacit support from the government to legitimize its aims, and states ten-point resolutions, one of which is the abolition of halal certification, and a ban on Sri Lankan women working in the Middle East and beyond (Gunaratna, 2018). It did not stop there, the Buddhist separatist group also objected to the slaughter of sacrificial animals which made it difficult for Muslims to carry out their religious rituals. This is especially true during the Hajj season, when Muslims slaughter animals such as camels, cows, buffalo, and goats. This is not only a religious obligation but also strengthens social solidarity among human beings by distributing the meat to relatives, friends, and the poor (Sarjoon, 2016).

Reports claim that some Muslim youths want to avenge the actions of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), but the majority of Muslims do not approve of the retaliation and even the majority of Muslims are praised for their patience in the face of such provocations. The main reason for not reacting to the protests stems not only from the sense of vulnerability Muslims experience in areas where Sinhalese
Buddhists are the main majority but also because it is widely believed that BBS is a very influential minority on the ground.

The spread of BBS is something that cannot be ignored, a report shows that many parts of the North West Province of Sri Lanka have recently become hotbeds of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) activists, areas such as the cities of Kuliapitiya, Dambadeniya, Mawathagama, Narammala, and Kurunegala have witnessed anti-Muslim protests include violence, demonstrations, and poster campaigns, then sending threatening letters to some Muslim businesses and some shops also being attacked at night, this activity (carrying a placard depicting Allah as a pig and then burning it). BBS then expanded its anti-Muslim campaign to focus on Muslim attire. BBS leader Ven Kirama Vimalajothy Thera stated that BBS will announce in Kandy the start of a new campaign against the long body covering worn by many Muslim women known as the “Abaya”, in Arabic as “Burqa”. However, BBS does not differentiate between Abaya and Burqa.

Although Muslims have been the main targets of violence from BBS groups, overall there has been an increase in violence against religious sites and different religious communities, such as mob attacks on places of worship, robberies, vandalism and the killing of priests. Protests against the public and the rise of hate speech on social media, the internet and other media have not received much attention, both locally and internationally.

**Sinhalese Buddhist Extremists view Muslims as Enemies**

The rise of extremism and violence against Muslims after the civil war is not a new development, the two major riots against Muslims that occurred before independence in 1915 were the result of a trade competition between Muslim traders and Sinhalese Buddhists (Perera, 2001), the second after independence, period of independence in 1975. In 1973 there was a spread of anti-Muslim sentiment within the Sinhalese group who began to feel that Muslims were superior in education over them. Many clashes and violence occurred. The clashes that occurred in early 1975 in Puttalam, a Muslim stronghold in the northwest of the island, constituted the worst communal violence “in which 271 Muslim families were left homeless, 44 shops were looted, and burned and 18 Muslims were shot inside a mosque by the police (Ali, 2015).

In the 1980s, Sinhalese Buddhist extremist groups were historically involved in anti-Muslim campaigns especially in the national media. These campaigns took the form of news, articles, newspapers, and letters to the editors on issues such as the
slaughter of cattle during the hajj, disturbances caused by the call to prayer from Mosques, and the construction of new Mosques. Following the end of Sri Lanka’s three-decade armed conflict between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the campaign of hatred against Muslims has continued to escalate widely. The perpetrators of Islamophobic campaigns are Buddhist extremist groups such as the Sinhala Ravaya, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), and Mahasan Balakaya who take various forms of expression including from mainstream media, social media, public gatherings, religious gatherings, and public posters. Then the Muslim issue was taken to a new level, by placing it in the context of the global discourse of Muslim political radicalization by Patali Champika Ranawaka in his polemic text "Al-Jihad Al-Quida", he not only hinted at the emergence of alleged "Muslim extremism" in Sri Lanka, but also radicalization Muslim politics, but also links it to the armed Tamil separatist movement led by the LTTE (Dewasiri, 2016).

It should be noted that several incidents between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims occur frequently. On September 9, 2011, a Muslim temple, which had stood for 300 years in Anuradhapura, was demolished by a mob led by monks, although police were present at the site, but did not interfere. Then on 20 April 2012, a Mosque named Kairiya Jummah in Dambulla, an area that many Buddhists consider a Buddhist holy city located in Matale District, Sri Lanka, about 2000 Buddhists including monks marched towards the Mosque and started demonstrating to demand the demolition of the Mosque. Shortly after the demonstration, firebombs targeted the mosque, then worshipers were evacuated and Friday prayers were canceled. TV footage showed that monks were involved in the violence, and two days after the mass demonstration in Dambulla, a monk took off his robes and showed himself at the Mosque (Saleem, 2015).

Following the Dambulla Mosque attack, there were also attacks and anti-Muslim demonstrations against the construction of a mosque and an attack on a Madrasa in Dehiwala in May 2012, then the Jummah Mosque arson incident in Unnichai village in August 2012, and attacks. which caused some damage to the loudspeakers. and the sound system at the Mohideen Jumma Kohilawatte Mosque in Wellampitiya, in August 2012 in Colombo there was a fire inside the Thakkiya Mosque on the Malwathu Malwathu Oya Line, Sinha Kanuwa, Anuradhapura (Sarjoon, 2019).

Among the tragedies reported in 2013, the worst was the demolition of the
walls of the Meera Makkam Mosque in Kandy in the early hours of the morning, the forced closure of the Masjid (Masjithul Araba) in Mahiyangana after pigs and stones were thrown into the Mosque during Friday prayers on 18 July 2013 (during the month of holy Ramadan), and the attack on the Grandpass Mosque in August 2013. Following the incident, anti-Muslim sentiment and violence received international attention, including from the United Nations (UN), which opposed and criticized Sri Lanka for violating the rights of religious minorities.

The United States Department of State, Human Rights, and the United States Bureau of Democracy have prepared and released a data report on International Religious Freedom for 2013. The report includes a 2013 sample of religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims conducted by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists. It said there were reports of harassment and social discrimination based on religious beliefs, that hardline Buddhist groups had attacked churches and mosques. The report said that the constitution and policies and laws to protect religious freedom in Sri Lanka. In practice, however, local authorities failed to take action against communal violence, including attacks on religious minorities such as Muslims, and perpetrators went unpunished.

Anti-Muslim sentiment and acts of violence occur in two major incidents in Sri Lanka in June 2014 and March 2018. Several incidents of Islamophobic decline occurred in November 2017 in Gintota and February 2018 in Ampara (Silva, 2019). The ongoing campaign against minorities especially Muslims eventually erupted into communal riots on 12 June 2014, in which Poson Poya (a celebration of the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka), an Alabama Samitha monk, and his driver, were confronted by a group of Muslims in Dharga City, responding to the incident. At this time, the Aluthgama Police were surrounded by monks and their supporters demanding immediate action, finally, three Muslims were detained until June 25, 2014 (Gunaratna, 2018).

Then there was an eruption of violence due to ethnic riots targeting Muslims, worse than the anti-minority hate incidents that occurred a few years earlier. The main areas affected are Aluthgama, Beruwala, and Dharga Town in Kalutara District on the Southwest island, on opposite ends of the country from the civil war areas in the North and East. About 10,000 people were displaced by the riots, 80% of them were Muslim, four people were killed, 80 others were injured and a large number of homes and businesses were destroyed. The violence has attracted international attention, partly because of
the same Islamophobia as in Myanmar, and partly because of incitement by Buddhist monks. For years, hardline Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka were notorious for attacking religious peace demonstrations, demonstrations of opposition political parties, and religious minorities (Morrison, 2019).

While the anti-Muslim campaign is focused on Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces, and there is strong criticism of the ineffectiveness of government actors to control the violence, politicians, and administrators also, directly and indirectly, support these extreme Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist forces. For example, In March 2013, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa who was secretary of the then-defense ministry signaled his open support for Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) by attending the opening ceremony of his Buddhist leadership academy. In his remarks, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said that he decided to attend the event after realizing its importance of the event. According to him, Buddhist religious leaders who carry out this important national task need not be feared or doubted by anyone.

It is noteworthy that with the change of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's regime in early 2015 and after, anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiment and violence have diminished. This clearly shows the close relationship between the Gotabhaya Rajapaksa regime and the ineffectiveness of the state in overcoming violence and anti-religious minority campaigns so far (Sarjoon, 2019).

There is an argument that the case of Sinhalese Buddhist sentiment towards Muslims in Sri Lanka is part of the anti-Muslim sentiment that has developed in many other countries in recent years, especially those who live as minorities and face serious challenges in practicing their religion, and principles, and their culture. Most cases in Europe are motivated by a rejection of fundamentalism, terrorism, and hard-line Islam. India's version of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence is motivated by the power of Hindu nationalism aimed at consolidating a stronger Hindu community. Even in the case of Myanmar, most of the Rohingya Muslims are marginalized citizens, and demand recognition of citizenship status from the Myanmar government, their role in the socio-economic and political fields in Myanmar is also limited (Gravers, 2015).

**Easter Sunday Bombing Tragedy 2019**

On April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday suicide bombings at three churches on the outskirts of the capital Colombo and four large hotels in the city center were hit by suicide bombings that killed at least 259 people, including 45 foreign nationals, and
injured hundreds, and two other bombs were detonated hours later as bomb disposal squads attempted to defuse them. Nine suicide bombers, including a woman, have been identified via CCTV footage, and one of the bombers was reportedly educated in the UK. They blew themselves up in three overcrowded churches and four hotels, and a hospital in the capital Colombo was targeted. In a national hunt, explosive devices are still being found and in the largest haul 83 explosive devices were unearthed near a bus station in Colombo (Siddiqui, 2019).

The bombing was the first large-scale terrorist attack since the end of the civil war 10 years earlier (Morrison, 2020). After the bombings, the Sri Lankan government immediately blocked access to all social media networks and messaging services to reduce the spread of misinformation or calls for retaliation, but this also affected the whereabouts of the victim's family members to identify them.

The Islamic State group (ISIS) has claimed responsibility for the attack, according to a report from the BBC which said ISIS had targeted “members of the US-led coalition and Christians in Sri Lanka” (Razak, 2020). Two days after the terrorist tragedy in Sri Lanka, “ISIS gets credit for the bombing”. Although Muslims in Sri Lanka are aware of ISIS ideology and its political mobilization in the Middle East, there are no clear signs of ISIS military mobilization in Sri Lanka. Another strong reason why Sri Lanka was singled out by ISIS is the growing Islamophobia and marginalization felt by Muslims in Sri Lanka by Sinhalese Buddhist anti-Muslim attacks. ISIS was able to attract Muslims around the world for its global campaign so it turned into a transnational Islamic movement. It turns out that several suicide bombers have traveled to ISIS strongholds in the Middle East, but although none have done so, the anti-Muslim sentiment that has continued to surge in Sri Lanka since 2012 is arguably enough to radicalize Sri Lankan Muslims.

Sri Lankan authorities remain unconvinced of the group's involvement even though ISIS has claimed responsibility, and authorities are investigating whether foreign militants advised, funded, or mentored the local bombers. Sri Lankan authorities have blamed a local extremist group: The National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ), whose leader alternately Mohammed Zahran or Zahran Hashmi, became known to Muslim leaders three years ago for his impassioned speeches online. The eight bombers were local Sri Lankan Muslims, including 34-year-old NTJ leader Mohamed Zahran “was one of the two suicide bombers who
blew themselves up at the Shangri-La hotel”.

On 23 April 2019, politician Ruwan Wijewardene stated that the government viewed the bombing as retaliation for the March 2019 massacre of Muslims at the Christchurch Mosque, New Zealand. However, this statement was refuted, given the Easter, Sunday bombings were planned long before the massacre of Muslims in Christchurch and there was no concrete evidence, then on 26 April 2019, the Sri Lankan Army and the Special Task Force, a police paramilitary unit, which specializes in counter-terrorism, carried out search operation in Sainthamaruthu, a city on the east coast. There, there were three explosions and a gun battle broke out as security forces stormed the Jihadi headquarters. Three suicide bombers blew themselves up, killing at least nine family members, six of them children, and three other Islamist militants shot dead by security forces (Morrison, 2020).

The Sri Lankan government was praised for its handling of post-bombing tensions, as they avoided mass killings and reprisals. A small number of violent revenge attacks took place, but these were isolated and apparently uncoordinated. The main immediate response was an outpouring of shock and sadness at the national level. In a positive development, the post-bomb political environment was marked by calls for peace from senior government leaders, and there were few isolated retaliatory attacks against Muslims, no previous scale of ethnic unrest. This can be an indication of how much influence the government has on the potential to inflame ethnic-religious violence. The religious aspect of the 2019 Easter bombings is evident.

Nearly a year and eight months later, the truth is starting to come out showing that the Muslim community had nothing to do with the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019, but only an alleged conspiracy for Sri Lanka's political gain.

The Prohibition of Wearing the Burqa

Most of the countries that have so far banned the burqa are from continental Europe (Wijesundara, 2019). One of them is that in Russia, the hijab was banned in schools and universities in two regions, namely the Stavropol region in 2013 and the Republic of Mordovia in 2014, both of which have been upheld by the Russian Supreme Court. Several regions of Catalonian Spain, including Barcelona, had also imposed a form of the burqa ban in 2010, but this was overturned by Spain's Supreme Court in 2013, then the burqa ban was also implemented in Italy in the regions of Lombardy in 2015, and Liguria in 2017. Ticino was the first Swiss canton...
to approve a total burqa ban in 2013 (Ati, 2019).

As of March 13, 2021, Sri Lanka has taken significant steps to ban the burqa and other face coverings in public places, citing national security stability. Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara told the BBC that he had signed a cabinet order which now needed approval from parliament. Officials said they hoped the ban would be implemented soon and fully implemented. All of this was done on the grounds of national security. The move comes nearly two years after the 2019 Easter Sunday hotel and church bombings. Suicide bombers targeted a Catholic church and a hotel frequented by foreign tourists that killed more than 250 people in April 2019.

Now the government is trying to reimpose the rule permanently. Sarath Weerasekara told reporters that “In the past, Sri Lankan Muslim women and girls never wore the burqa. It is a sign of the religious extremism that is emerging today. so the permanent ban should be fully implemented, so I have signed it and the regulation will be implemented immediately,” Weerasekara said, quoted by Reuters,

The prohibition violates their right not to discriminate and is against the freedom of expression, belief, and religion. Many Sri Lankans have expressed disapproval and concern over the move, with some claiming it is a way to please the Buddhist majority and will create lasting divisions among the religious community (Rutnam, 2021). Further, it can lead to greater marginalization and create rifts between some Muslim groups and society at large (Koch, 2011).

Some have argued that the ban hints at the underlying undertones of racism, Islamophobia, and an inability to understand other cultures. Being a Muslim woman is an integral part of the burqa, as it is to be closer to the Prophet. Most sexual harassment is caused by the sexy view of exposed body parts and this dress code denies sexual harassment. When someone wearing a burqa is harassed, the onus is on the perpetrator, not the victim.

Responses from various quarters emerged about the burqa ban in Sri Lanka, one of which was from Pakistan's Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Saad Khattak, writing that the ban would only hurt the feelings of Sri Lankan Muslims and around the world. The UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, wrote that “the ban on the burqa is incompatible with international legal guarantees of the right to manifest one's religion or belief & freedom of expression” (Mallawarachi, 2021). From Indonesia the Deputy Chair of the Indonesian Ulema Council, Anwar Abbas said the burqa ban
in Sri Lanka was “offensive and offensive to Muslims around the world”. According to Anwar Abbas, it would be unfair if the Sri Lankan state banned the burqa just because of the incident of a few people. Anwar Abbas cited the Sri Lankan government’s stance as one of the “radical and terrorist acts committed by the state against Muslims in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Muslims in Indonesia urge the Sri Lankan government to respect the rights of Muslims to practice their religion”.

Meanwhile, the Social Justice Party asked the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to intervene to resolve the situation. Sri Lankan government authorities also plan to close 1,000 Islamic schools and ban the wearing of the burqa for national security. PKS through the chairman of the Central Executive Board Bukhori Yusuf stated: “The Indonesian government as the largest country in ASEAN should take steps to eliminate colonialism and injustice wherever it is”. Bukhari asked the Sri Lankan government to immediately stop the plan. This is because the ban on the burqa and the closure of Islamic schools are considered discriminatory actions against Muslims. Bukhari believes that the use of the burqa cannot be associated with extremism or terrorism.

**Closure of 1,000 Muslim Schools**

Sarath Weerasekara also said the Sri Lankan government plans to ban more than 1,000 Islamic schools which he said violated the national education policy, “no one can open schools and teach children whatever you want. Schools must comply with educational policies that have been set by the government. Most schools that are not registered under the government’s policy “only teach Arabic and the Koran, so that’s bad”, says Sarath Weerasekara.

The government also wants to close about 1,000 madrasas that are not registered with the government. Students enrolled in madrasahs generally come from poor and economically marginalized families and struggle to obtain secondary education qualifications. Muslim students from low-income families living in rented houses, especially in urban areas, are often rejected from public schools due to intense competition. In Colombo alone, nearly 5000 children fail to attend public schools. Muslim students' access to public and private schools to continue their secondary education is significantly lower than that of their non-Muslim counterparts, due to socio-economic and cultural reasons since Sri Lanka’s independence.

Private madrasah has targeted economically weak students from Muslim societies where a large number of children have few options for receiving education.
Many Muslim children drop out of school because they cannot afford the expensive tuition fees. Since economically vulnerable Muslim children are being targeted by madrasa schools, the Sri Lankan government needs to appoint Muslim scholars and fund them to regulate the curriculum in educational activities, especially for Muslim students. The country has the responsibility to regulate religious schools including madrasas. Educational assistance from foreign countries should be carefully monitored by the state but not necessarily limited. The religious school syllabus must be prepared by a community-approved cleric who has a deep understanding of religious and secular education in government (Imtiyaz, 2021).

Hilmi Ahmed who is president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka told the BBC that if officials had problems identifying a person wearing a burqa “the person wearing the burqa will not have a face covering for identity check purposes”. But he said everyone has the right to the freedom to wear a face-covering regardless of their faith. This has to be seen from a rights point of view and not only from a religious or cultural point of view. Regarding the issue of madrasas, Ahmed said most Muslim schools are registered with the government, “maybe there are about 5% that have not complied and of course can be handled”, he said.

**Covid-19 and Negative Stigmatization of Muslim Minorities**

Before the onset of the pandemic, Muslims had been the target of Islamophobia in the mass media by Sinhalese Buddhists. Covid-19 sparked stigmatization and panic that impacted several categories of society during the pandemic in Sri Lanka. Electronic media and social media in particular play a very important role in the stigmatization process, government officials are also involved in stigmatization. Two popular Sinhala private TV channels tend to target Muslims as the mastermind behind the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak (Silva, 2020).

The Buddhist-majority country has taken several steps in its fight against Covid-19 that harm or stigmatize its Muslim minority. This is a continuation of the majority policy which has recently shifted from a focus on ethnicity to religion (Ripoll, 2020). In response to Covid-19, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, declared a red signal and a state of emergency, which made many people worried about the right of citizen status. The appointment and delivery of the message from the government were less than encouraging regarding the rights of minorities such as...
Muslims in Sri Lanka. For example, the government's response to Covid-19 has recently made a statement showing that Covid-19 has always been associated with Sri Lankan Muslims.

Many accusations tend to be disproportionate against Muslims, one of which is the intersection of public health rights and religious rights which argue that Covid-19 may be used to encourage discrimination against religious minorities, especially Muslims including: (1) Human rights groups are concerned that the government has ordered 1 April 2020 to arrest those who criticize officials or spread what they perceive as fake news about the pandemic and will impact Muslims and other minorities. (2) The existence of anti-Muslim discourse describes ethnic minority communities who are not responsible for their behavior during the pandemic, as well as allegations of the organized spread of Covid-19. (3) Attacks on Muslim websites have not been stopped by government security forces, and have continued during Covid-19. (4) Two Muslim minorities who have spoken out against anti-Muslim discrimination against the government, have been detained without due process (Kelly, 2020).

Regarding the role played by the mainstream media in spreading hate across Sri Lanka, the BBC reports: “Since the death of the first Sri Lankan Muslim from Covid-19 on 31 March 2020, some media in Sri Lanka have publicly blamed the ethnic Muslim community for spreading the epidemic Covid-19 disease, although only 11 deaths have been officially recorded in the country.”

One incident on TV channel B in its news broadcast showed a large gathering at a mosque, which reportedly violated the ban on public gatherings at the time. The news was then shared on a Facebook group of more than 70,000 people as an anti-social movement that was carried out by the Muslim group in question. Then the news was disseminated to create a narrative that Muslims were the mastermind behind the spread of Covid-19 in Sri Lanka. However, subsequent investigations revealing that Muslims were behind the spread of Covid-19 was a big lie and the meeting at the Mosque was approved by the health authorities in the area (Silva, 2020).

In another social media post, there is a middle-aged Muslim from the city of Akurana who claims that he brought Covid-19 from India, then he went to get supplies and also spread the Covid-19 outbreak in the cities of Kurunagala, Gampola, and Galagedera, which he visited. to supply its wares to retail stores. His travels from India to cities in Sri Lanka were a deliberate move to spread Covid-19
in Sri Lanka in a somewhat irresponsible manner.

These examples show how mass media and social media in Sri Lanka are always targeting the Muslim community in their coverage of Covid-19. The report has no factual basis. In terms of social problems related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of stigmatization that deepens inequality, such as ethnicity, religion, class, and ethnicity. For example, hate speech against Muslims is ingrained in Sinhalese society. The ongoing pandemic in Sri Lanka has also given rise to a pandemic of fear and stigmatization resulting in several social problems and public health crises, especially among Muslims in Sri Lanka.

**Cremation for Muslims who died due to Covid-19**

Nihal Abeysinghe, Senior Virologist and Government Epidemiologist explained that coronavirus bodies can be buried or cremated. He said there was no question of germs spreading through the water in graves and causing harm to human health. The advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) has been followed by countries around the world. But Sri Lanka rejected the WHO's advice and insisted on cremating Muslims who died of Covid-19 with a health ministry that lacks virologists. This is supported by Professor Tissa Vitarana who said that there were no virologists in the committee formed to deal with this issue.

Even India run by extremist leaders who are hostile to Muslim minorities has allowed burials for minorities. For Muslims around the world, burying their dead is a religious obligation and Islam has dictated how it should be done. For every Muslim death is the end of life in this world and the beginning of life in the hereafter. Until now the Muslims who died of Covid-19 were forcibly cremated by the Sri Lankan government, and while no one else dared to comment on it, Muslims were also not allowed to do a PCR test in person to confirm that there is a report circulating that many people who died naturally were also forced to be cremated.

In other countries there is strong criticism of the Covid-19 cremation of corpses, Muslims are very angry and claim that this policy has nothing to do with health or medical reasons, but to insult Muslims, some suspect that all this is a provocation of people who believe in their faith. This was taken up in Parliament by Muslim and non-Muslim members and both asked President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the government to change this policy, and ironically there was no response from the government.

The Muslim and Christian communities are grateful for the
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outpouring and support they have received from various religious leaders, medical personnel, and civil society activists, but the government remains firm in its decision and stance not to bury the bodies infected with Covid-19. One last hope in accessing their basic right to bury the dead is the Supreme Court. After the mandatory cremation policy was introduced, Muslim leaders, civil society groups, and some Muslim families who were cremated petitioned the Supreme Court (Tegal, 2021).

The team, led by former DPR member Ali Zahir Moulana, took the case to the Supreme Court and it was rejected without concrete and clear reasons. We as citizens do not realize why the Supreme Court rejects petitions from minorities. We do not know whether the petitioners have violated the rules of the Constitutional Court when applying. In the midst of all that comes the shocking fact of a 20-day-old baby who was admitted to the hospital at 10.45 am on 7 December 2020. The baby died at 16:15 the next day on 8 December 2020 and was cremated at 4 pm, then on December 9, 2020, the hospital failed to notify the parents when the baby died, but was only notified of his death when his parents contacted him.

The father of the dead baby desperately wanted to do a PCR test at a private hospital, but the hospital staff refused and forced his father to sign a waiver to allow the cremation. Then they were told to go to Borella's cemetery to cremate the baby without her consent. When the father asked why he was in such a hurry to cremate the baby’s body, while several other bodies were waiting to be cremated and there was no answer from the doctor and others. "I couldn’t say anything and the doctors and other people didn’t even bother to answer my questions but all went out to cremate the baby without any sense of human conscience," the baby's father said in a video interview.

In another video circulating on Wednesday, December 16, 2020, a Sri Lankan Muslim minority complained that his wife had died at Kalubowila Hospital and was not allowed to see the body and not allowed to do a PCR test in person. They were forced to sign to be cremated. Meanwhile, the cremation of a 20-day-old baby gets wide attention around the world, especially in Muslim countries, In the middle east gulf countries a poster of a baby is displayed on the vehicle, then Sri Lankan Muslims living in European countries staged demonstrations in front of the Sri Lankan High Commission in London to protest the cremation of the bodies of Corona Muslims.

At first glance, the Sri Lankan government insists that the bodies of all Covid-19 victims should be cremated,
regardless of religion, which may seem fair. However, upon further examination, it is clear that the decision to impose cremation on Muslims is against WHO guidelines. Dr. Channa Perera, Consultant Forensic Pathology with Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health, told the BBC World Service: "The government is not against Muslims, but they have a bit of fear about whether the virus can be used for illegal activities. Maybe unwanted people can gain access to the body and it can be used as a biological weapon”", later opposition leader in Sri Lanka, Sajith Premadasa, stated that “the act of racism being perpetrated against our Muslim brothers and sisters is disgusting and must be faced by everyone (Harees, 2020).

The amendment to the Gazette for cremation in Sri Lanka reads as follows:
(1) Regardless of the provisions of regulation 61A the bodies of people who have died or are suspected to have died, due to Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) will be cremated. (a) at a temperature of 800 to 1200 degrees Celsius for a period of at least forty-five minutes to one hour for complete combustion, to prevent potential biological threats; and, (b) at a cemetery or a place approved by the competent authority under the supervision of that authority, following the instructions issued by the Director-General of Health Services.

(2) No one may hand over the body of a person who has died or is suspected of having died due to Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) to anyone except for the person who takes the necessary action. cremation officer, nominated by the appropriate authority. (3) Clothing and personal protective equipment that cannot be reused used by people who handle corpses at the cemetery or such place must be burned by placing them with the coffin at the time of cremation.

The new regulation was quickly incorporated into the Minister of Health Regulation’s “Provisional Guidelines for Clinical Practice in Suspected and Confirmed Covid-19 Patients”; this was the introduction of a controversial mandatory cremation policy that is still in effect today. The Notice Sheet above was issued on April 11, 2020, ago.

Negative publicity from Sri Lanka reached the African continent when a cleric speaks at the Great Mosque of Nigeria about Muslims being cremated. Are extremists who think the world is part of Sri Lanka and not Sri Lanka part of the world, realizing the devastating impact of this negative publicity on Sri Lanka? After the end of the civil war, the Sri Lankan government severed ties with Muslim countries and forged close ties with violent anti-Muslim countries such as the United States, Israel, India, and China who
allegedly implemented their criminal agendas against Muslims. The Sri Lankan agenda with them is to promote hatred against Muslims and divide Sri Lankan Muslim society.

CONCLUSION

Before Sri Lanka's independence, there have been several interfaith incidents that caused Sinhalese Buddhist groups to hate Islam very much, hatred against Islam is also been secretly supported by the government until now: such as the separatist group BBS who voiced rejection of the certificate label. Halal in food, suicide bombings on Easter Sunday at three churches on the outskirts of the capital Colombo caused a bad image of Islam and was despised by Sri Lanka's Sinhala Buddhist community, which led the government to ban the wearing of the burqa for Muslim women, as the dress is the same as in terrorism cases, then culminated in the closure of 1,000 madrasas by the Sri Lankan government.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Muslims are increasingly marginalized in Sri Lanka due to government policies that are against Islam where people who die from the coronavirus must be cremated regardless of their religion, the decision to impose cremation on Muslims is one of the religious racis in Sri Lanka. In addition, electronic media and social media also play a very important role in the process of stigmatizing Muslims, one of which is on two private TV channels that tend to target Muslims as the mastermind behind the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak.

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