

Policy Studies 41

Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict

Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem



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List of Acronyms

CFA	Ceasefire Agreement
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students
GOSL	Government of Sri Lanka
ISGA	Interim Self-Governing Authority
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MIC	Muslim Information Centre (Colombo)
MP	Member of Parliament
MSGR	Muslim Self-Governing Region
NEMPA	North-East Muslim Peace Assembly
NUA	National Unity Alliance
PSM	Peace Secretariat for Muslims
P-TOMS	Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
UNP	United National Party
UTHR(J)	University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna)

Executive Summary

In the six decades since independence, Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has evolved from a multiparty parliamentary struggle into a stark military confrontation between two entrenched ethnic blocs, the Sinhala majority (who are primarily Buddhists) and the Tamil minority (who are largely Hindus). Conspicuously ignored are the concerns of Sri Lanka's third-largest ethnic group, the Muslims, or "Moors." Seen by many Sinhalese as an exogenous urban trading community, and by the Tamil nationalists as native Tamil-speakers disloyal to the Dravidian linguistic cause, the Muslims have been treated at best as peripheral stakeholders in the future of the island. However, like the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Muslims have been victims of Sri Lanka's ethnic violence, even targeted on occasion by *both* the government forces *and* the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A final and lasting political settlement to the ethnic conflict will require the Muslim community's consent, as they account for roughly one-third of the population in the Eastern Province.

Rejecting the monolithic and exclusionary two-way framing of the ethnic issue by Sinhala and Tamil partisans, and responding to the escalating violence inflicted on Muslims caught in the northeastern war zone, Muslim leaders in recent decades have sought to mobilize Muslim political pressure to participate directly in the Sri Lankan peace process, including in the negotiations ensuing from the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002 between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. Although such efforts have been vigorously pursued by Sri Lanka's first popular Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, and some meaningful goals have been achieved, the tangible results have fallen short of the Muslim aspiration to play an equal role at the negotiating table with the Sinhala-dominated government and the LTTE.

The most crucial factor limiting the role of the Muslims in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict remains an external one: the pervasive ethnonationalist outlook that views the contest exclusively as a war between two ethnicities (or "races"), the Sinhalese and the Tamils. From this dualistic point of view—unfortunately shared by many political leaders and citizens—the contest comes down to a two-way fight between the army of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, and only the fighting forces can be represented at peace negotiations. According to this way of thinking, the Muslims are historical latecomers, not ancient primordial stakeholders in the future of the island, so their interests can be represented by the other parties to the dispute. This narrow and deliberate way of defining the conflict has repeatedly marginalized the Muslims, relegating them to the sidelines whenever serious peace negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE have been undertaken.

This exclusion from the peace talks has been part of a wider historical process. After independence, leaders drawn from the Colombo-based Muslim elite denied any shared identity with the Tamils, although most Muslims are Tamil-speakers and many live adjacent to Tamils in the northeast region, a position that continues to generate resentment and distrust among Tamil nationalists and the LTTE. Having carefully defined themselves as neither Sinhala nor Tamil, the Muslims' overarching interests and goals as a "third party" remain unclear. The geographically dispersed pattern of settlement across the island has resulted in regionally divergent Muslim political loyalties and cultural identities at the grassroots level. Although the uneven demographic pattern of the Muslim community at the national level (8 percent) and in the Northern and Eastern Provinces (23 percent) has complicated their claim to equal status, the history and reality of significant Muslim population centers in the north and east strongly support their claim to be represented and to participate actively in any peace talks.

For much of the twentieth century, Muslim politicians exhibited a defensive strategy that sought to protect the vulnerable and highly visible Muslim minority by side-stepping ethnonationalist involvements and emphasizing mainstream coalitions and patronage politics. Today, Muslim politicians have many incentives to seek pragmatic, ethnically defensive alliances with the dominant Sinhala-majority parties such as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party instead of collaborating with or joining the Tamil nationalist cause. However, unlike Colombo-centered Muslim politicians, Muslims living in the north and east continue to have historic linguistic affinities and pragmatic political and economic concerns in common with their Tamil neighbors, including anxieties

over the steadily encroaching state-sponsored Sinhala Buddhist colonization project. Despite the founding of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress in the 1980s as an instrument to unite Muslims and defend their collective interests, a high degree of intraparty schism and political instability exists, raising constant questions about who truly speaks for the Muslim community and who should negotiate on its behalf. This, too, has been used as a reason for denying Muslims equal status at the negotiating table.

Starting in the spring of 2006, in violation of the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002, the escalating violence by both the armed forces of the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has endangered the lives and property of Muslims in the northeast, prompting renewed calls for a direct Muslim role in the peace process and reinvigorating the concept of a separate Muslim Self-Governing Region of devolution. This reflects the strong Muslim demographic strength in specific parts of the Eastern Province, especially Kalmunai and other Muslim towns in Ampara and Batticaloa Districts (see Map 1, p.5), and it underscores the absolute necessity of accommodating these Muslims as part of any long-term reconfiguration of the contested northeastern region. At the same time, however, because the northeastern issue has little direct impact on the two-thirds of Sri Lanka's Muslims who live in the southern Sinhala-majority areas of the island, a Muslim Self-Governing Region is unlikely to generate ardent island-wide Muslim support or political pressure. This point is well-illustrated by the plight of the northern Muslims who were uprooted and brutally expelled from the Northern Province in 1990 by the LTTE. Many from this group are still living in displacement camps near Puttalam seventeen years later.

Given the entrenched tendency of the Sinhala and Tamil political elites to exclude the Muslims, the Muslim leadership will need to undertake a long-term and dedicated effort to successfully advance their campaign for an equal role in the peace process. Meanwhile, Muslim political and civil society leaders must strengthen their claims for independent participation by seizing key opportunities to negotiate practical solutions to local and regional issues in the largely Tamil-speaking northeast, the strategic region where the Muslims are directly faced with violence and displacement in the geographical core of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is commonly viewed—both internationally and in the eyes of many Sri Lankans themselves—as a stark binary dispute between two culturally and linguistically polarized communities, the Tamils and the Sinhalese. However, the conflict is a three-way problem that will ultimately require a three-way solution. In addition to the island's 74 percent Sinhala majority and its 18 percent Tamil minority (12 percent Sri Lankan Tamils and 6 percent Estate or Upcountry Tamils), there is an 8 percent Muslim minority whose cultural identity and collective interests must be addressed if any long-term settlement is to be achieved. The geographical locus of the conflict is the east and north of the island, where Muslims comprise 23 percent and 5 percent of the population, respectively. With deep roots that can be traced to Indo-Arab and Persian maritime commerce across the Indian Ocean over the past millennium, and many prosperous and well-established settlements in the northeast and elsewhere on the island, the Muslims have a historic claim to be regarded as stakeholders in any future configuration of the Sri Lankan state. In the north and east of the island, where many of them cultivate paddy lands and engage in fishing as close neighbors to the Tamils, a practical and just solution to the Eelam conflict can never be achieved without the collaboration and active participation of the Muslims as joint stakeholders in the process.

At the same time, however, the Muslims occupy an anomalous position in Sri Lankan ethnonationalist identity politics because they have

Muslim...interests must be addressed...[in] any long-term settlement

defensively constructed an ethnic identity that is neither Sinhala nor Tamil, distinguishing themselves categorically from the island's two ethnic adversaries. In turn, the Sinhala and Tamil ethnonationalists have readily reciprocated by excluding the Muslims from their "two-way" ethnic dispute over the future of the Sri Lankan state, yet enlisting them as short-term allies when convenient. However, in response to the urgent threat of violence to Muslims living in the northeast region of the island—vividly exemplified by the expulsion of all Muslims from the Northern Province by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990—the Muslim leadership has actively sought to become engaged as a full-fledged "third party" in the peace negotiations that began in 2002 between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Although these Muslim political initiatives have achieved some successes, they have not achieved the broader goal of making the Muslims equal partners in the peace process.

To understand why the Muslims have been marginalized from the peace process and their key issues repeatedly ignored at the national level, it is necessary to recognize the contributing roles played by the ethnic Sinhala majority-controlled Sri Lankan state, the ruthless Tamil separatist movement, and the self-interested Muslim political elites. It is also necessary to note the conspicuously uneven distribution of Muslims across the demographic landscape of the island, a lopsided settlement pattern that includes both urban concentrations in the Sinhala-speaking southwest as well as dense rice-farming villages in the Tamil-speaking northeast. In the twentieth century, Muslim political leaders stressed the need for a distinct communal

identity based on the shared vulnerability of their community as a whole, but in fact the cultural, economic, and geographic diversity of Sri Lanka's Muslims has always meant that it would be a heterogeneous community with divergent interests and plural political adaptations at the local level. The fact that two-thirds of the

***Sri Lanka's Muslims...[are]
a heterogeneous community***

Muslims reside in the southern Sinhala-majority regions of the island helps to explain why so many Muslim politicians have formed pragmatic coalition alliances with the Sinhalese parties that form the government rather than joining in a coalition with the Tamil nationalists and separatists based in the north and east. Finally, although Muslim political parties coalesced in the 1980s largely in response to the demands of eastern Muslim voters living in the "Tamil Eelam" war zone, leading organizations such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) have suffered internal schisms and opportunistic political defections that have weakened the effectiveness of their leadership.

All of these factors have thwarted efforts to forge a unified political front that could guarantee the Muslim community long-term benefits, civil rights, and physical security from ethnic violence at the national level. According to one despairing Muslim commentator, the Sri Lankan Muslims are now “dejected and more fractured than ever” (Mihlar 2007). Another scholar has labeled the current situation for the Muslims a “political quagmire” (Ameer Ali 2004).

To trace the roots of the present situation, the next section outlines the geographic and historical origins of the Sri Lankan Muslim community that have produced its present-day cultural and regional diversity. A review of the evolution of Muslim identity politics in the late colonial and early independence periods reveals the steady intensification of a Muslim-Tamil ethnic split and the continuing tendency of Muslim leaders to pursue pragmatic or defensive coalition politics within the mainstream Sinhala parties. The section that follows traces the increasing disconnection, as the island has moved toward civil war in the postindependence period, between the southwestern, commercially-oriented, urban-based Muslim political establishment and the regional and cultural interests of Muslim farmers and fishermen living in the Tamil-speaking northeast. The monograph then offers a realistic assessment of the most interesting experiment in Muslim politics since independence, the creation of a separate Muslim political party, the SLMC, in response to grassroots pressure from Muslims in the east. While articulating critical demands of the conflict-affected Muslims, including protection within a Muslim Self-Governing Region (MSGR), the SLMC has been repeatedly weakened at the parliamentary level by internal schisms and rival Muslim factions. Following this assessment of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the monograph turns to some of the key issues for the Muslim community in the post-2002 peace process, noting some partial successes but pointing to the recurrent failure of the Muslims to play a truly pivotal role in the negotiations to secure their rights. The monograph concludes with a summary that accounts for the marginalization of the Muslims from the highest levels of the peace process and offers practical prospects for the constructive role that the Muslims can still play in achieving a stable and positive accommodation with their Tamil neighbors in the northeast.

History, Culture, and Geography: The Sources of Muslim Identity

Origins of the Sri Lankan Muslims

Compared to Sinhala and Tamil prehistory, which extends back at least to the first millennium BCE, the origins of the Muslim community are more

recent, which has meant that their presence on the island for “merely” a thousand years has been discounted in ethnonationalist debates. Although the earliest evidence from the Islamic period is limited to fragmentary travelers’ accounts, early Islamic coinage, and some lithic inscriptions, the history of Sri Lanka’s Muslims is plainly connected with the pre-Islamic seaborne trade between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Not only Arabs but Persians too were frequent early visitors to the island (Ameer Ali 1981a; Effendi 1965; Kiribamune 1986). With the advent of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula in the first half of the seventh century and the subsequent conquest of Persia, trade across the Indian Ocean was increasingly dominated from the eighth century onward by Arab Muslim merchants from ports on the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Unlike the Persian and Turkic invasions of North India that established major states and empires, the Muslim impact on the coasts of South India and Sri Lanka was predominantly Arabic in culture and mercantile in motivation, part of the same historical stream that resulted in the Islamization of insular Southeast Asia (Wink 1990).

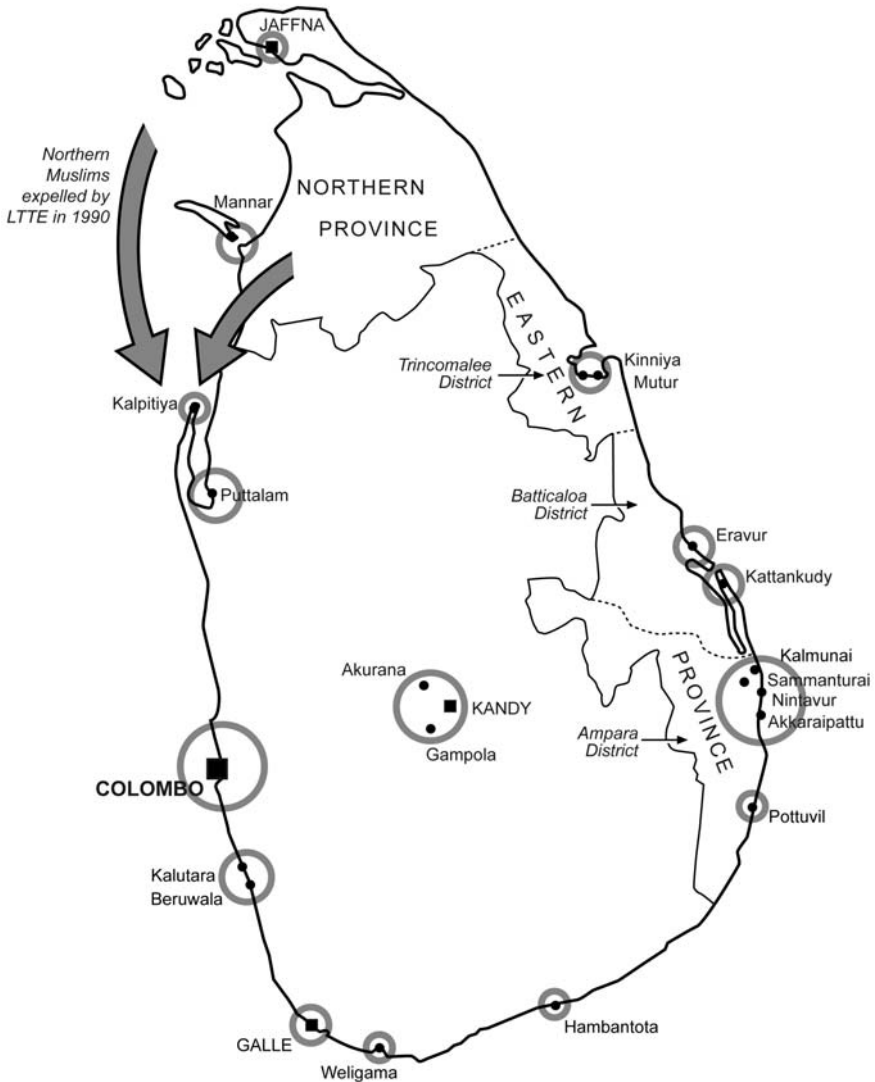
The medieval Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Kerala and Sri Lanka, eager for revenues from overseas commerce, allowed Arab merchants—many of whom acquired local wives by whom they fathered Indo-Muslim progeny—to establish a dominant economic position in port settlements such as Calicut and Colombo (Arasaratnam 1964; Dale 1980; Kiribamune 1986). Thus, not long after Vasco da Gama’s 1498 naval crusade against the well-established “Moors” of Calicut, the Portuguese encountered

Muslim traders in Sri Lanka who spoke Tamil, who had ongoing links with the Muslims of the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts of South India, and who had been given royal permission to collect customs duties and regulate shipping in the major southwestern port settlements under the suzerainty of the local Sinhalese Kings of Kotte (Ameer Ali 1980; Indrapala 1986; Abeyasinghe 1986). Commercial, cultural,

and even migrational links between Muslim towns in southern India and Sri Lankan Moorish settlements are confirmed in the historical traditions of Beruwala, Kalpitiya, Jaffna, and other coastal settlements where Sri Lankan Muslims have lived for centuries (Casie Chitty 1834: 254 ff.; Denham 1912: 234; Ameer Ali 1981a) (see Map 1). Like the coastal Muslims of South India and the Muslims of Southeast Asia, the Sri Lankan “Moors” are Sunni Muslims of the Shafi’i legal school, a shared legacy of

***Arab merchants...
establish[ed] a dominant
economic position***

their earliest south Arabian forefathers (Fanselow 1989). To varying degrees, the Sri Lankan Muslims also preserve matrilineal and matrilocal family patterns, the legacy of a “Kerala connection” that has shaped Tamil social structure in Sri Lanka as well (Raghavan 1971: 199–217; McGilvray 1989, 2008).



MAP 1. Important Sites of Muslim Population in Sri Lanka

Although the period of Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule was onerous to all Sri Lankans, it was especially harsh for the Muslims, who were subjected to special penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic faith and the threat they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade. One of the effects of Portuguese policies was to encourage (and by an official edict of 1626, to require) migration of many coastal Muslims inland to the Kandyan Kingdom, where they engaged in *tavalam* bullock transport and a diverse range of other occupations (C. R. de Silva 1968; Ameer Ali 1980; Dewaraja 1986). Ultimately, Muslims settled throughout all of the Sinhala regions of the island, where two-thirds of the Muslim population currently reside. In 1626, King Senerat of Kandy is also said to have resettled 4,000 Muslims in the Tamil-speaking Batticaloa region of the east coast to protect his eastern flank from the Portuguese. Probably as early as the fifteenth century, and certainly by the seventeenth, large numbers of Muslim farmers were well-established on the east coast—in the contemporary Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, and possibly also in the southern areas of Trincomalee District—where they intermarried with local Tamils and shared a common matrilineal social structure. The east coast has the highest concentration of Muslims in the local population, and also is a region of vital importance to the ethnic conflict today (McGilvray 2008). In addition, smaller groups practicing Islam include the Malays, who are Sunni Muslims descended from Javanese soldiers and princes brought to the island during the period of Dutch colonial rule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hussainmiya 1986; Mahroof 1994) and are now concentrated in the Slave Island area of Colombo and in Hambantota. Additionally, some exclusive groups of Bombay and Gujarati Muslim traders—Bohras, Khojas, and Memons—have professional and business interests in Colombo.

In terms of their historic position in the polity, the Sri Lankan Muslims—unlike the Mappilas, Marakkayars, and Deccani Muslims of South India (Fanselow 1989)—never played a dominant military or political role in the kingdoms of the island (Ameer Ali 1981a; Dewaraja 1986), and as a result they did not become identified with the state nor develop their own political or military traditions of sovereignty. Because no Muslim dynasty existed in Sri Lanka, no distinctive genres of Muslim courtly high culture (poetry, music, art, cuisine) arose or were patronized on the island. Moreover, because the Muslim population is relatively small and geographically dispersed, the critical conditions for large-scale peasant uprisings or jihadist campaigns—such as occurred during the Mappila Rebellions in Kerala in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dale 1980)—have never existed here. Because the two main protagonists in the Sri Lankan

ethnic conflict—the Sinhalas and the Tamils—justify their political claims in terms of ancient conquests and medieval control of territory, the Muslims find themselves at a “historical” disadvantage.

The Diversity of Muslim Communities in Sri Lanka

On every part of the island where they live, the Muslims are highly visible because of their distinctive dress, food, religious practices, and prominence in retail trade. In terms of ascriptive status, the Sri Lankan Muslim community as whole is more egalitarian and homogenous than its South Indian counterparts. Although the wealth and class structure descends steeply from elite gem-trading millionaires to urban entrepreneurs to rural farmers and boutique keepers (Mauroof 1972), the sorts of hereditary, endogamous, caste-like divisions that have been documented among the Muslims of India do not exist among the Sri Lankan Muslims (Ahmad 1973).

However, in order to appreciate the complexity of the Muslim position in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict, it is essential to note the distinctive features of Sri Lankan Muslim regional demography and local Muslim subcultures. The most obvious cleavage in the political geography of Sri Lanka is between the mainly Sinhalese southwest and largely Tamil northeast. Roughly two-thirds of all Sri Lankan Muslims reside in the southwest, with especially large concentrations in metropolitan Colombo, where at least one-fifth of the entire Muslim population lives (Phadnis 1979: 29–32), and in the highland region around Kandy and Gampola (see Map 1.). Muslims are also historically associated with southern coastal towns such as Kalutara, Beruwala, Galle, and Weligama, where they dominate particular industries such as the gem trade. Elsewhere in the central interior of the island, in virtually every Sinhala town and village, Muslims form a widely dispersed community of agricultural small-landholders and shopkeepers ranging from textile and hardware merchants to restaurant owners and tea shop proprietors (Mauroof 1972).

*two-thirds of all...Muslims
reside in the southwest*

In the Northern Province, Muslims constituted 5 percent of the overall population until their forcible expulsion by the LTTE in 1990 (Hasbullah 2004). Historically, the largest concentration was in Mannar District, where they formed the majority in one rural Assistant Government Agent division, but they were also concentrated in Mannar Town and Erukampitty. Other northern Muslim population centers included Jaffna Town and its environs, Mullaitivu Town in Kilinochchi

District, and smaller populations in coastal and agrarian villages. Since 1990, many of these displaced northern Muslims have been living in camps in Kalpitiya and in nearby Puttalam Town, where they have increased the local Muslim population significantly.

The Eastern Province, however, is the region where dense Muslim settlements constitute the most critical feature of the ethnic landscape, and where a stable solution to Sri Lanka's conflict will require the greatest degree of Muslim participation. The Eastern Province consists of three districts—Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara—that are home to one-third of all Muslims in Sri Lanka. Muslims here live in interspersed Tamil and Muslim towns and villages along a lagoon-laced shoreline. The east coast Muslims, especially those of Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, also share a

distinctive matrilineal kinship and matrilocal household system with their Tamil neighbors. Although some eastern Muslims are businessmen, weavers, and fishermen, the majority are paddy farmers and landed proprietors. In Trincomalee District, where Muslims constitute 24 percent of the population, the largest concentration is along the southern shore of Koddigar Bay in the paddy-farming towns of Kinniya and Mutur.

*In Ampara District...
Muslims constitute the
largest ethnic community*

In Batticaloa District, which is 28 percent Muslim, the main Muslim towns are Eravur and Kattankudy. In Ampara District as a whole, Muslims constitute the largest ethnic community (42 percent) in comparison with Sinhalese (38 percent) and Tamils (20 percent). However, in the narrow Tamil-speaking coastal corridor of Ampara District, in a string of densely populated towns stretching from Kalmunai to Pottuvil, one-half to three-quarters of the population are Muslims.

The Construction of a "Moorish" Identity

After 300 years of Portuguese and Dutch colonial repression, the Muslims took advantage of gradually liberalized British policies in the nineteenth century that permitted freedom of commerce, urban property rights, purchase of Crown land, and the appointment of local Muslim headmen. However, they remained absorbed in their customary modes of livelihood and mosque-based institutions, influenced by Sufi disciples and pious Indian Muslim trader/missionaries from Kayalpattinam and Kilakarai, and strongly averse to mass literacy, the printing press, and English-language education, which was then available only through Christian missionary schools (Ameer Ali 1980; Shukri 1986a: 348 ff.; Mahroof 1990). The

British-imposed exile to Sri Lanka in 1883 of a charismatic Egyptian revolutionary, Orabi Pasha, finally served to catalyze an Islamic revival and a movement to establish Muslim schools offering a secular, Western-style curriculum (Mahroof 1986a, 1986b), but this still placed Muslims far behind the Sinhalese and even farther behind the Tamils, who had begun to enroll in Christian mission schools in Jaffna sixty years earlier.

From the beginning of the colonial period in the early sixteenth century, members of the predominant Tamil-speaking Muslim community in Sri Lanka were routinely designated by the colonial term “Moor” (*Mouro*, “Moroccan”), which the Portuguese applied to Muslims throughout their African and Asian empire, as well as by such familiar European terms as “Mohammedan” or “Mussalman.” By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the west coast urban Muslim elite had begun to self-consciously promote their unique racial identity as “Ceylon Moors” (or *Sonahar* in Tamil) in order to establish a legitimate claim for seats in the colonial system of communal (i.e., “racial”) representation that the British instituted and maintained for one hundred years (Nissan and Stirrat 1990: 28–29). In this environment of rival “racial” claims, a prominent Tamil leader, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, in a strategically calculated speech to the Legislative Council in 1885, marshaled linguistic and ethnographic evidence to argue that, apart from religion, the Moors and Tamils shared a great many cultural and linguistic traits resulting from conversion and intermarriage over the centuries. When he published it three years later as an essay on “The Ethnology of the ‘Moors’ of Ceylon” in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, Ramanathan’s views appeared to gain more academic legitimacy (Ramanathan 1888). Muslim leaders immediately perceived his well-argued but politically motivated conclusion, that the Moors were simply Muslim members of the Tamil “race,” as an academic excuse for the continued political domination of the Muslim community by the Tamil leadership. Although Ramanathan’s strategy failed when the British governor appointed a Moor to the Legislative Council a year later, his essay seemed to embody the patronizing Tamil outlook found on some parts of the island, where even today some high caste Tamils look down on the Muslims as their inferior and uneducated neighbors. Muslim/Tamil acrimony over Ramanathan’s “ethnological” thesis has been festering for well over a century, evoking feelings of ethnic betrayal on the part of Tamil chauvinists, and the LTTE in particular, over the Muslims’ alleged disloyalty of the Tamil nationalist cause.

In the narrow rhetorical space of “ethnicized” colonial identities, the political implications of Ramanathan’s aggrandizing thesis motivated the

Moorish leadership to embrace the label of “Ceylon Moor” with great tenacity, repudiating their Tamil-ness and asserting their identity as “an entirely different race of Arab origin” (Ameer Ali 1980: 102). In 1944 they founded the Moors’ Islamic Cultural Home in Colombo as a center for the dissemination of Moorish history and genealogical information, just as the Dutch Burgher Union had been campaigning for Sri Lanka’s Eurasian “race” since 1908 (McGilvray 1982, 1998). As Qadri Ismail has noted, this Moorish racial identity for the Sri Lankan Muslims was constructed to emphasize the idea that Muslims were peaceful Arab traders who valued the sanctity of the island (called *Sarandib* in Arabic sources) because legend says Adam and Eve fell to earth near Adam’s Peak (Ismail 1995). Emphasizing their patrilineal Arab ancestry allowed Moorish spokesmen to conveniently ignore their maternal connections to Tamil wives and mothers, while the Moors’ Tamil linguistic heritage could be characterized simply as a “borrowed” trade language.

Because language is the key marker for Tamil ethnicity, the Sri Lankan Muslims have had to find different ways of explaining their widespread use of Tamil—which in earlier generations was sometimes phonetically written in Arabic script (Uwise 1986, 1990)—without surrendering their distinct identity. A few historians and spokesmen for the Muslim community have asserted that “Muslims have no commitment to any particular language,” citing the willingness of Moors living in Sinhala-majority districts to enroll their children in Sinhalese-language schools (Shukri 1986b: 70; see also K. M. de Silva 1988: 202). A. C. L. Ameer Ali contends that the Muslims are becoming “a linguistically divided community” (Ameer Ali 1986–87: 167; 2004), and it is true that sermons at some mosques in Colombo are now delivered on certain days in English or Sinhalese instead of in Tamil. At the same time, however, some northern and eastern Muslims still use—or at least do not object to—the unifying phrase “Tamil-speaking people/s,” despite its political implications in the context of the LTTE’s campaign for a linguistically-defined Tamil Eelam. Thus, the debate about whether Tamil and Muslim identities are linguistically divorced is not entirely resolved.

Muslim community leaders today understand that any kind of “Tamil” identity would be especially risky for Muslims living in Sinhala-majority parts of the country. They have not forgotten the most terrifying episode of their preindependence history, the widespread 1915 Sinhala-Muslim Riots, which forced the Muslim community to seek the protection of the British colonial authorities (Roberts 1994a; Ameer Ali 1980, 1981b). Since then, no Sinhala violence against Muslims has erupted on such a massive scale, but a number of small-scale anti-Muslim disturbances and confrontations

have continued to occur in majority Sinhala areas. A recent example is the Mawanella riots of 2001, in which three Muslims reportedly died and 127 Muslim shops were burned along the Colombo-Kandy road. Every such incident, of course, has its own specific origins and provocations, but the Sri Lankan Muslims are always aware that they are vulnerable to such mob violence and that they need the state's protection. The 1915 violence also embittered the Muslims against the Tamil elite, who sought to retain Ponnambalam Ramanathan's prominence in the Ceylonese nationalist movement by rising to defend the Sinhala rioters against harsh British justice. In Muslim eyes, Ramanathan's stance revealed the hypocrisy of "Tamil-speaking" ethnic solidarity, and this betrayal was later recalled bitterly by Moorish politicians at crucial moments even in the 1950s and 1960s (Hassan 1968: 101; Sivathamby 1987: 204).

***Muslims are...aware that they
are vulnerable to...mob violence***

Adopting a Contemporary "Muslim" Identity

Despite the Muslims' racially complex and culturally plural origins, a simplistic dichotomous debate over "Arab" versus "Tamil" was sustained for many years, with more or less the same political subtext of ethnic estrangement and rivalry. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, a long-standing argument had intensified within the community itself as to whether the term "Moor" or "Muslim" was preferable as a group designation. Nativistic "Moor" partisans incorrectly asserted that the Portuguese applied this term only to racially pure Arabs (Azeez 1907: 4; Mohan 1987: 27–31, 117), and "Muslim" adherents emphasized a broader pan-Islamic religious identity that would ignore race and language and, incidentally, make room for the Malays and Coast Moors.

By the 1970s "Muslim" had become the most common term used when speaking English or Tamil. The popular term *Sonahar*, an older Tamil and Malayalam word which originally denoted West Asians, especially Arabs or Greeks, has largely fallen out of fashion, although "Lanka Yonaka" was still used as an ethnonym for the Sri Lankan Moors in the 1971 census. In common English parlance, both "Moor" and "Muslim" can be used interchangeably today to refer to indigenous Tamil-speaking Muslim Sri Lankans, but "Muslim" has now become the predominant usage. This makes the Muslims the only ethnic group in Sri Lanka to proclaim their identity under a solely religious label.

The mainstream Sri Lankan Muslim community shares a strong feeling of identity as orthodox Sunni Muslims who follow the Shafi'i school

of Islamic law and jurisprudence. The Sunni/Shia division does not exist in Sri Lanka, except for some very small Gujarati trading communities, such as the Bohras, who belong to the Ismaili sect of Shi'ism. Likewise, a Muslim version of the Hindu caste system, common in many parts of India and Pakistan, has never arisen in Sri Lanka, despite the existence of some hereditary *Maulana* (Seyyid) religious elites and a low-status endogamous Barber-Circumciser community (*Osta*). Although there is clearly more to Sri Lankan Muslim identity than simply their shared Islamic faith, the religion is definitely a significant unifying and motivating factor. This is reinforced by the existence of a body of Muslim personal law that is recognized by courts in Sri Lanka, by a statutorily established Wakfs board that oversees Muslim religious properties and trusts, by an island-wide network of separate government Muslim schools, and—until quite recently—by a government Ministry of Muslim Cultural and Religious Affairs.

Internally, the Muslim religious landscape in Sri Lanka has been affected by the same sorts of global Islamic currents that are apparent elsewhere in the Muslim world (Nuhman 2007: chap. 5). Reformist and revitalizing movements such as the Tabliqi Jamaat and the Jamaat-i-Islami are quite active in Sri Lanka, seeking to boost daily observance—and understanding—of the five pillars of the faith (creed, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and alms). Many in the Muslim community also share the view that various forms of Wahhabi and Salafist influence are entering Sri Lanka directly or indirectly from Saudi Arabia by concealed channels of money and proselytization. The influence of such strict interpretations of Islam is now being seen in a growing intolerance, exemplified in the mob violence and property destruction in Kattankudy in 2004–06, of mystical Sufi traditions of Muslim devotional piety celebrated at saintly tomb-shrines and under the guidance of Sufi religious teachers (International Crisis Group 2007: 22–25). Sri Lankan mosques, like those in most parts of South Asia, commonly house the tombs (*ziyarams*) of local saints to whom vows are made and for whom annual death anniversary festivals (*kandooris*) are performed. In recent decades, some of these saintly shrines have been condemned as idolatrous (*shirk*) and have been demolished in the name of Islamic purification. Most of the major Sufi saints' festivals, such as at Daftar Jailani near Balangoda, and at the Beach Mosque Shrine near Kalmunai on the east coast, are still popularly celebrated, but everyone is aware of strong fundamentalist opposition to them (Aboosally 2002; McGilvray 2004; Hussein 2007). Several individual Muslim sheikhs (Sufi teachers) with strong supporters on the east coast of the island—Rauf Maulavi and Abdullah Payilvan in particular—have been openly accused of blasphemy by reformist clergy who take a dim view of what they regard as the “pantheis-

tic” tendencies in Sufi doctrine. As in other countries experiencing Islamic fundamentalism and reform, women’s dress has recently become a public indicator of religiosity, with Sri Lankan Muslim women increasingly adopting the *hijab* head covering and *abaya* gown—and in some cases even the *niqab* face mask—in place of the traditional sari that was worn by women of a previous generation in a distinctly Muslim way.

Overall, Sri Lankan Muslims in recent decades have felt the polarizing power of a more narrow, literalist, and legalistic current in contemporary Islam, which paradoxically seems to have also stimulated a renewed interest in mystical, non-literalist Sufi traditions as well, especially among educated middle-class Muslims. One sign of the direction this Islamic debate is taking is seen in the growing resistance to simplistic and doctrinaire brands of Islam, a position represented by the informal label “*sunnatu jamaat*,” the mainstream faction that honors customary Sri Lankan forms of Muslim worship. It is widely observed that, like Sri Lankan political leaders of other faiths, some Muslim politicians continue to have their personal religious mentors, often Sufi sheikhs or Maulanas (Seyyids, descendants of the Prophet) with whom they have a *murshid/murid* discipleship relationship of some kind.

The essential point is that current Sri Lankan Muslim politics is not infused with religious ideology or sectarian jihadism. Humanitarian solidarity with fellow-Muslims who are endangered or oppressed is strongly felt, as when the 2004 tsunami tragedy struck the east coast, inflicting roughly a third of Sri Lanka’s tsunami deaths on a community that is 8 percent of the total population. The same sympathies have been felt toward those Muslims who were expelled by the LTTE from the north and displaced from Mutur. However, no major Sri Lankan Muslim religious political parties per se operate, such as one finds in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and while there may be some vociferous preachers, no conclusive evidence of militant or violent Islamist movements has been found. Although the founding manifesto of the main Muslim party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, states that it would be guided by “Islamic principles,” it did not constitute a theological platform. Instead, the manifesto was intended to be read as a coded promise of honesty and integrity, as a Muslim anticorruption pledge. Broadly recognized Islamic terms and concepts may be invoked during election campaigns, but Muslim politicians tend to avoid

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sectarian jihadism***

sectarian intracommunity religious quarrels. Muslims in Sri Lanka, like Muslims everywhere in the world, are taught to value the solidarity of the Umma, the universal community of believers, and many of the key elements of Islamic worship are group-based experiences such as Friday prayers and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Global issues affecting Muslims in other parts of the world in the first decade of the twenty-first century (for example, Afghanistan, Iraq, even blasphemous Danish cartoons) may arouse as much indignation as do threats to Muslims living in Sri Lanka. In this sense, the religious identity of Sri Lankan Muslims contributes to a political consciousness that links together Muslims from all corners of the island.

Muslim Politics from Independence to Civil War

The general tendency of Muslim politics from independence in 1948 up to the outbreak of the armed conflict in the 1980s was to accommodate Sinhala nationalism in exchange for socioeconomic concessions and privileges for the Muslim community, and to remain aloof from the Tamil ethnic struggle. Apart from an ephemeral east coast Muslim alliance with the Tamil-led Federal Party in the 1956 elections, Muslims consistently opted for a strategy of defensive and pragmatic coalition politics within the two major Sinhalese nationalist parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Sir Razik Fareed, who emerged as a leading Muslim spokesman in the early decades of independence, conspicuously endorsed the Sinhala Only national language policy in 1956 and railed against what he called “political genocide” of Muslims under “the Tamil yoke.” This is often cited as a critical example of Muslim political solidarity with the Sinhalese. However, the situation on the ground was more complex, with countervailing Muslim-Tamil political links, especially in the northeast.

Muslim Benefits from Sinhala Coalition Politics

The crisis around the language issue in 1956 was a key moment in postindependence Sri Lankan history. Razik Fareed took an unequivocal stance and made clear where Muslim loyalties should lie. His speeches accused the Tamils of discrimination against the Muslims in education and in local administrative appointments, as well as apathy and indifference wherever Muslim voters were politically underrepresented. During the Official Language debate in 1956, a Tamil member of Parliament (MP) sarcastically accused him of being a “Sinhala defector.” Fareed rhetorically turned the tables by retorting that he and the Muslim community could never have been considered “Tamil converts.” A heated replay of the old Ponnambalam Ramanathan “ethnological” argument of 1888 then immediately ensued on the floor of Parliament (Hassan 1968: 96–106).

The long-standing domination of Muslim politics exercised by southwestern urban Muslim political elites was a definitive factor in the language crisis. As it turned out, some of the benefits of this political arrangement did accrue to the Muslim community at large, particularly in education, where tremendous improvements were made in access and facilities in a short period of time under successive governments (Ameer Ali 2001: 10). Developments in this sector were intended to help develop a Muslim professional middle class that could take up technical and civil service positions while simultaneously preserving a Muslim identity. The “tyranny of Tamil teachers,” as one Muslim parliamentarian put it (Ibid.), and the control of Tamil-language education by Tamils was significantly altered with the establishment of a separate government Muslim school system, the training of a corps of Muslim teachers (largely Tamil-speaking) to staff them, and the appointment of Muslims as education officers on a proportional basis. Dr. Badiuddin Mahmud played a defining role as education minister in SLFP-led governments in the 1970s to promote these advancements in Muslim education. Apart from standard academic subjects, the curriculum in the Muslim schools currently includes Islam and optional Arabic language, and female students wear a distinctive Muslim *hijab* uniform that was adopted in 1982. Although these reforms have improved Muslim educational success (Ibid. 1986–87, 1992), they arguably have worsened ethnic tensions by restricting direct face-to-face contacts and friendships between students and faculty from different ethnic communities.

For many years following independence, Muslim political elites from both the southwest and the northeast collaborated in a rather lopsided parliamentary strategy. As Christian Wagner has documented in detail, the effort to extract rewards from the Sinhala-majority parties for the geographically divided and class-stratified Muslim minority depended on rural east coast Muslim farmers and fishermen electing back-bench Muslim MPs, while a few wealthy, well-connected west coast Muslim politicians—whose private interests often did not coincide with those of rural east coast Muslim paddy farmers and fishermen—received influential cabinet appointments. This strategy therefore focused on specific areas of Muslim community development while other issues, such as land distribution and irrigation, did not receive equal attention, and it continued even while Muslim shops, shrines, and paddy fields were periodically threatened by local Sinhalese mobs (Mohideen 1986: 42–44; Wagner 1990: 136–84; 1991; Roberts 1994b: 283; Aboosally 2002; International Crisis Group 2007). The success of southern-based Muslim politicians, contesting from ethnically-mixed constituencies where Muslims were a

distinct minority, was based on their ability to appeal to the Sinhala voters. Their electoral success attests to the political skills of these Muslim leaders and to the ability of the main Sinhala national parties to accommodate Muslim political interests. This political alliance continues even today, with the UNP in particular being able to garner the support of Muslims in southwest urban settings from Colombo to Hambantota.

In the northeast, however, members of the Muslim political elite of the early postindependence decades were often characterized as inconsistent and opportunistic in terms of their party politics. A number of eastern Muslim politicians—including Gate Mudaliyar, M. S. Kariapper, and M. C. Ahmed—earned a legendary reputation for switching tickets and crossing the floor to join whichever Sinhala party had come to power (Phadnis 1979; Mohan 1987: 47). Ameer Ali states that “the Muslims on their part rarely supported that [the Federal] party except for reasons of electoral advantage” (Ameer Ali 2001: 9), suggesting that beyond political convenience, none of these Muslim politicians had a commitment to the Federal Party or to the cause of Tamil nationalism. Sometimes, in fact, Muslims became the most vociferous opponents of Tamil demands for power sharing, whether in the proposed District Councils of the 1960s or in the District Development Councils of the early 1980s (K. M. de Silva 1986: 449). This effectively made any permanent Tamil-Muslim alliance or joint political strategy extremely difficult, because cooperation with the Sinhala-dominated national parties, and with the state, seemed to offer greater advantages to the Muslim community (Ibid.: 443). Muslim politicians always presented themselves as team players in mainstream Sinhala politics, while prudently ensuring that Muslims were represented on both sides of the parliamentary aisle. One observer appreciatively notes that “without forming a political party of their own like the Tamils, but by playing politics with the existing national political parties, the Muslim leadership of post-independent Sri Lanka shrewdly guided their community to attain a level of progress which is unique in the history of any contemporary ethnic minority” (Ameer Ali 2001: 10). Kingsley de Silva and others have approvingly viewed the Muslims’ cultural accommodation with Sinhala society, and their pragmatic coalition politics, as the mark of a “good” minority, implicitly contrasting them with the recalcitrant and uncooperative Tamils (K. M. de Silva 1986, 1988; Dewaraja 1995).

Countervailing Muslim-Tamil Links in the Northeast

As an educated Muslim middle class began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, its demands for practical socioeconomic concessions (university admissions and job quotas, for example) were neutralized by a broad array of Islamic religious and cultural self-esteem programs, some of them

funded by competing regimes in the Middle East, which cost the government nothing (O'Sullivan 1997). However, it soon became difficult to ignore the repercussions of the state's pro-Sinhala policies on the Muslim polity. The Sinhala Only Act had an impact on all Tamil-speaking people, including the Muslims of the northeast, who also found increasing cause for sympathy with Tamil nationalism as a result of the state's Sinhala-oriented development policies in that region of the island (Fazil 2004: 171; Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004a: 156). The large-scale, state-sponsored land colonization projects in the northeast favored Sinhala migrants from the outside, often to the disadvantage of Tamils and Muslims within the region—dramatically altering local demographics and diminishing the political power of minorities in areas where they had once been the majority (Fazil 2004: 172). Administrative policies too seemed to reinforce Sinhala/state power. For example, the

newly created Ampara District's boundaries were drawn to include the Sinhala majority areas of the original Batticaloa District, in effect reducing the Muslim plurality in the Ampara area (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004a: 157). The fact that Ampara (recently renamed Digamadulla) District has not had a Muslim Government Agent in charge of the district to date—despite the fact that Muslims are a plurality (42 percent) of the district population—has only reinforced this perception of discrimination against the Muslims by the state.

For brief but critical moments in the postindependence period, Muslim-Tamil alliances of various kinds have emerged in the northeast. The year 1956 was significant not just for Sinhala-Tamil politics but for Muslim-Tamil politics as well, a year in which, according to K. M. de Silva, "the fragile alliance of Tamils and some Eastern Province Muslims as 'the Tamil-speaking peoples of the island' was shattered, never to be put together again" (K. M. de Silva 1986: 449). However, while Razik Fareed and other Muslim representatives famously (or infamously) voted in favor of the Sinhala Only national language bill in 1956, the Muslim member from Pottuvil who contested on the Federal Party ticket, M. M. Mustapha, voted against it. The Federal Party attempted to appeal to Muslims of the northeast with references to the "Tamil-speaking peoples" during its early years. It even adopted a resolution at the Trincomalee Convention of 1956 in favor of both a Tamil state and a Muslim state

***The Sinhala Only Act...
[affected] all Tamil-speaking
people, including the Muslims***

within a federal set-up. Although it was seldom able to enforce party discipline over its Muslim MPs, the Federal Party retained a degree of popular support among the Muslim population in the northeast until the goals of the party became more exclusivist and confrontational. Yet even in the

1960s and 1970s, not all Muslims distanced themselves from the Federal Party. For instance at the Vaddukoddai Resolution meeting in 1976, M. H. M. Ashraff, who was to later to establish the SLMC as the first successful Muslim political party, reportedly said, "If elder brother Amirthalingam [then Tamil leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front coalition in Parliament] failed to get Tamil Eelam [a Tamil-speaking homeland in the

northeast], the younger brother Ashraff will get it" (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004b: 201), thus giving some indication of the countervailing political sympathies of the northeastern Muslims.

On balance, however, the gains of the Muslim community in the postindependence decades were due largely to the Sri Lankan government's interest in securing a "bulwark" against the Tamils, and the "alacrity" with which Muslim politicians responded to the government's overtures (K. M. de Silva 1986: 449). The state's policies toward the Muslims also afforded the government a means of maintaining strong economic ties with the Islamic countries of the Middle East (Ameer Ali 1984). As Ameer Ali argues, however, competing Muslim political interests undermined the fragile unity of the community that was being promoted ostensibly on the basis of religious identity: "There are two issues on which the political choice of the Muslim leaders has driven the community to a point of no return; namely, the language issue of the fifties and the Tamil Eelam issue of the eighties. Both of them are now threatening to divide the community" (Ibid. 2001: 8). Ultimately, the inability of the Muslim political elite, dominated by the southwest Muslims, to advocate and mediate an understanding between the Sinhala-controlled government and the increasingly forceful Tamil nationalist movement, and specifically its failure to address the vital security concerns of the Muslims in the northeast, has proven costly to the hegemony of this traditional southwestern Muslim political bloc.

***Muslim-Tamil
alliances...have emerged
in the northeast***

Violence in the Northeast and the Emergence of Muslim Political Parties

As the conflict in the north and east intensified in the 1980s into a full-blown ethnic conflict that would claim 60,000 lives, create over a million

refugees, and affect the lives of an entire generation of Sri Lankans, the position of Muslims in the northeast became more insecure and untenable. Although the conventional narrative portrays the Muslim community as supporting the state in the Eelam Wars, the situation on the ground was more complex. Muslims found themselves increasingly victimized as the conflict intensified. The year 1990 marked a breaking point in relations between the Muslim community and the dominant Tamil militant group, the LTTE, who carried out massacres of Muslims in the east and a massive ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the north of the island, including Jaffna and Mannar. Nevertheless, some Muslims joined the Tamil militant movement for various reasons, and that contributed to the armed and political struggle increasingly led by Tamil militant groups.

The rising insecurity and frustration created a vacuum in Muslim politics in the east. Among a number of nascent eastern Muslim political parties, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress emerged as the major new political force for Muslims. As it consolidated power, the SLMC gave voice to a growing Muslim nationalism that responded to the needs of Muslims caught between rival Sinhala and Tamil ethnonationalist movements.

*the LTTE...carried out...
a massive ethnic
cleansing of Muslims*

Escalating Eelam Violence and the Dilemma of a Muslim Response

The standard Muslim narrative of the ethnic conflict is one of victimization and alienation at the hands of a ruthless Tamil insurgency and of steadfast loyalty to the Sri Lankan state. The story is narrated both by spokesmen for the state and by Muslim political elites, as well as retold with a negative twist by Tamil nationalists. The direct participation of Muslim youths in Tamil militant movements in the 1980s is nowadays ignored, or conveniently explained as a result of forced recruitment. A set of essays in *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (Frerks and Klem 2004) reveals three contradictory Muslim positions on the issue. One essay states that “the rise of militancy among Tamil youths received no support from the peace-loving Muslims,” although it acknowledges that Muslim youths joined militant groups (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004a: 156, 160). In another chapter, M. M. Fazil claims that Tamil militants “abducted Muslim youths and forced them to collaborate with the separatist movement” (Fazil 2004: 175). In a third chapter, Rameez Abdullah acknowledges the more complex situation that existed on the ground: “Muslims were not against the legitimate struggle of the Tamil militants. In fact, many Muslim youths

joined the militant movements. When the Sri Lankan Army started to crack down upon the Tamil militants they found refuge in Muslim villages” (Abdullah 2004: 193).

Where it occurred, Muslim involvement in Tamil militancy was driven by at least two different sources. First, forced recruitment seems to have occurred, in which Muslim communities had to support the militant movements through finances, logistical support, and even manpower. Second, some Muslims voluntarily joined Tamil militant movements and rose through the ranks in groups such as the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS) and even the LTTE. In fact, the LTTE sent two Muslims as a part of its negotiating team for talks in Colombo with President Ranasinghe Premadasa in June 1989. The massacre of Muslim policemen abducted by the LTTE, the bloody attacks on villages in the east, as well as the expulsion of Muslims from the north in 1990 put an end to this Tamil-Muslim alliance, and since then, political convenience—or perhaps mutual embarrassment—has encouraged both the Muslim community and the Tamil nationalists to ignore the contributions and sacrifices made by the Muslims of the north and east in the Tamil militant struggle. Meanwhile, in a move that nicely illustrates the contradictory tensions within the Sri Lankan Muslim community, a number of Muslims in the south have joined the Sri Lankan armed forces. Although Muslim representation within the armed forces has fallen well short of their national demographic, Muslims have played a key role, particularly in military intelligence.

The Tamil militancy that emerged and grew in the mid-1980s as a result of the state’s failure to respond to the demands of Tamil political leaders in Parliament, and the increasing state and communal violence against Tamils that led to a loss of confidence by Tamil civilians in the Tamil political class, placed tremendous pressures on the Muslim community in the northeast. During the early period of the conflict, Muslims had to endure harassment, mandatory “contributions” amounting to extortion and robbery, political marginalization, and outright killings (Fazil 2004: 176). The militancy created a dynamic of violence that was to tear apart the Tamil and Muslim communities, which had

*militancy...[tore]
apart the Tamil and
Muslim communities*

lived in stable coexistence (although certainly not in perfect amity) for centuries. Previously incidents of ethnic rioting had occurred, but they had been highly localized (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004a: 156; McGilvray 1997, 2003: 99). In April 1985 the east coast experienced its first major

bout of communal violence. An attempted extortion led to a five-day strike action (*hartal*) and a demonstration expressing Muslim loyalty to the state, and was followed by the killing of LTTE cadres by the police in a Muslim area. Tamil-Muslim violence broke out in Kalmunai, Eravur, Ottamavadi, Valaichchenai, Mutur, and Kinniya, leaving a deep scar on Tamil-Muslim relations, both at a political and a local community level. Nonetheless, in May 1985, following a massive search operation carried out by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, local Tamils were assisted by Muslims (Fazil 2004: 177). As the conflict escalated, it “exposed the Muslim community—particularly in the North and East—both to terrorism by Tamil militants and to state terrorism” (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004a: 160). As the various military actors, including the Sri Lankan armed forces, the Tamil militants, and the Indian Peace Keeping Force, attempted to wrest control over territory and populations, the suffering of Muslims increased. Some were directly targeted, as in the massacre of forty Muslim policemen in Karaitivu by the Tamil National Army. Others suffered “collateral damage,” as in December 1987 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force shelled Ottamavadi and the LTTE laid siege to Kattankudy, killing and displacing a number of Muslims.

For the Muslims, the overall experience of three Eelam Wars and the unsatisfactory peace processes in between was one of victimization: “Human rights violations committed by Tamil militants against innocent and unarmed Muslims after 1980 was unparalleled and unmatched. Hundreds of Muslim youths were abducted and killed, for no other reason than being Muslim” (Ibid. 2004a: 159). In terms of sheer terror, displacement, and death toll, the suffering of the Tamil community has unquestionably been of a larger scale, but the pain and atrocities inflicted upon the Muslims and Sinhalese have had a deep impact on these communities that cannot be denied or ignored.

*the overall experience...was
one of victimization*

As the Tamil militancy entered its second decade in the late 1980s, the place of the Muslim community within the envisioned Tamil Eelam homeland and in the armed struggle was increasingly in question. Members of the northeast Muslim community did not have a unified response to the goals of the militancy, but they were increasingly hostile to its methods and uncomfortable with the idea of living in a merged northern and eastern Tamil Eelam under ethnic Tamil control. Consequently, the hostility and aggression of the Tamil militants intensified “because the Muslims were unsympathetic towards the demand for a separate Tamil

state, [and] they were perceived as a threat to the Tamil struggle” (Fazil 2004: 175). Later, when Tamil nationalists were in a position to regain the support of the Muslim community, they failed to do so. In the wake of the Indo-Lanka Peace Agreement and the creation of a North East Provincial Council, the Tamil-dominated council made unwise decisions, such as the elimination of Muslims from the police force and the appointment of volunteer teachers, ignoring the set ethnic ratio (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004a: 160). In addition, the failure to go ahead with a referendum vote regarding the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces only intensified suspicions within the Muslim community. All of these cumulative polarizing events took place in the east, where the Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims are demographically balanced, precisely the region where Muslims will have to play an active role in any consensus to end the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

The watershed year for Muslims came in 1990, when collective military action against the community became widespread and the suffering intensified. The LTTE transformed its intimidation and control of Muslim communities into a policy of direct aggression and collective punishment. The LTTE carried out large-scale massacres in the mosques of Kattankudy and Eravur, where more than 260 Muslims were killed. This violence led to large scale displacement, as Muslims in outlying villages fled to Muslim enclaves for protection. The LTTE’s policies of intimidating the community, seizing Muslims’ land and cattle, and demanding

taxes created a situation of structural and direct violence. In the five districts of the Northern Province, the LTTE carried out a radical ethnic cleansing of the Tamil homeland, giving just two hours for Muslim residents to flee from Jaffna Town, while Muslims in other areas were given no more than twenty-four to forty-eight hours to depart (Hasbullah 2004). Fleeing Muslims

were searched and stripped of all of their jewelry and savings, and allowed to keep only 150 rupees per individual. The suffering of the northern and eastern Muslim community was manifold, with the multiple forms of violence, displacement, and economic loss all creating new victims. Given the generally amicable history of Tamil-Muslim relations in the Northern Province, the expulsion was completely unexpected. The northern expulsion in October 1990 has been the single most drastic, and yet most tragically “successful,” act of ethnic cleansing in the Sri Lankan conflict: as many as 65,000 displaced Muslims are still languishing in camps near Puttalam (Ibid.: 229).

*displaced Muslims are
still languishing*

Two common explanations for the LTTE's anti-Muslim violence in 1990 are (1) that it was collective punishment for and a precautionary measure against Muslim collusion with the state and (2) that it was a natural consequence of the exclusivist politics of Tamil militancy and an expression of deep-seated Tamil ethnic chauvinism. Both explanations have their roots in the dilemma Muslims faced in having to choose between accommodation with the state or joining an alliance of "Tamil-speaking peoples." From the early stages of the Eelam conflict, the state covertly sought to drive a wedge between the Muslims and the Tamils, and this was eventually taken up as a policy by providing Muslims with a government-trained community-defense force. Under the direction of Defense Minister Lalith Adulathmudali, and counseled by Israeli military advisors, Muslim youth were trained and armed as Home Guards. Later, human rights groups alleged that some of these units were involved in attacks on Tamil villages (UTHR[J] 1992) and that some Muslims were employed as spies and informants by the state security forces in the northeast. In providing a rationale for the 1990 expulsion from the Northern Province, pro-LTTE sympathizers have sought to provide a link with attacks by Muslims against Tamils in the east. They have also argued that such a "humanitarian" evacuation was necessary to ensure the physical safety of Muslims in light of growing violence. It is more likely, however, that they were seen as a potential or active fifth column for the government by Tamil militant groups, even as the government in turn seemed incapable of providing adequate security or of taking up the political demands of the Muslims.

A Distinct Muslim Polity and the Emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

Along with the escalation of violence and the intensification of ethnic polarization, a transformation in Muslim politics was also taking place. The emergence of a distinctively communal Muslim politics, the promotion of a Muslim nationalist ideology, and the founding of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress can be seen as three interlinked and mutually reinforcing processes that helped to bring about this transformation.

In assessing the trajectory of Muslim politics in the postindependence period, the growth of Muslim communal politics is one of the more conspicuous features. This trend gained new ground with the founding of the SLMC, a party that has become a key force in national politics. It can be argued that communalism was inevitable given the violence against Muslims and the chauvinism of Tamil militancy: "The systematic acts of aggression against the Muslims further fed the emergence of a separate

Muslim nation” (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004b: 202). However, it is also possible that Muslim communalism was a response to the pervasive communalism of Sri Lankan politics in general. “The Muslims adapted themselves to the ever changing political situation. They didn’t have a firm and stable political ideology” (Abdullah 2004: 200). Looking at postindependence Sri Lankan politics, it is clear that the Muslims were the last of the country’s ethnic communities to resort to communal party politics. As Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam note, the vanguard of Muslim communalism, the SLMC, directly emulated the examples of Sinhala and Tamil communal parties (Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam 1997). In the lead-up to independence, the Tamils coalesced into political parties in response to Sinhala domination of the main nationalist movements. In the decades after independence, the trend toward polarization and communalism intensified in both communities as a variety of Sinhala oriented nationalist groups, including the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (People’s United Front) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front), asserted their power and ethnic grievances, while Tamil political parties consolidated their power over the northeast and made more radical demands. As problems mounted within the older Tamil parties (the All Ceylon Tamil Congress and the Tamil Federal Party), these organizations eventually amalgamated into the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Within the first decade after independence, the Upcountry Tamils also had coalesced into the Ceylon Workers’ Congress and the smaller Democratic Workers’ Congress.

The Muslims, by comparison, came to communal party politics very late. Although Muslim ethnicity had always been a factor in Sri Lankan politics, Muslims had resisted the idea of a distinct Muslim political party. However, by the 1980s a significant political vacuum had emerged as the

Muslim politicians within the two main national political parties, the UNP and SLFP, failed to offer an effective response to the concerns of the victimized northeastern Muslims. For the Muslims of the north and east, the tactical alliance between Muslim politics and the state had always had both

Muslims...came to communal party politics very late

advantages as well as drawbacks. Suffering the consequences of the expanding Sinhala state colonization project in the northeast and the challenges of staying neutral in the face of the competing interests of the state and Tamil nationalists, the Muslims of this strategic region were caught in the middle.

The creation of the SLMC can be seen as a byproduct of the failure of multiethnic parties like the UNP, SLFP, and even some of the old leftist parties to resist Sinhala communal politics at its core. Instead, these parties supported and popularized Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as a part of their program and vision—thereby undermining the state's and the Sinhala majority's relations with the minority. At the same time, Muslim voices sympathetic to Tamil aspirations were marginalized by the violent and authoritarian separatist movement for Tamil Eelam. A significant failure of Tamil nationalism has been its inability to fully address the Muslim factor, relying at best on the rhetoric of the "Tamil-speaking people." Muslim communalism in turn represented a failure on the part of Muslim political leaders at the time to address regionally divergent concerns within the Muslim community or to act as third-party mediators between the Sinhala and Tamil polities. Instead, both the Sinhala-dominated state and the Muslim political elites in the southwest have, for the most part, used each other's insecurity vis-à-vis the Tamils to cement a tenuous relationship that has become, with the intensification of the Eelam conflict, an increasing liability for the Muslim communities in the north and east.

Founded in 1981 by a study group in Kalmunai, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress first contested the North East Provincial Council Elections to become the main opposition in the council in 1989. The SLMC was not the first Muslim political party; it was, however, the first to effectively mobilize the forces of communalism and regional identity within the Muslim community. With the dynamic leadership of its charismatic founder, M. H. M. Ashraff, the party was able to galvanize support in the east and to address disparate sections of the Muslim polity across the island, thereby establishing the SLMC as the dominant force in Muslim politics. Over successive elections, the SLMC was able to expand its power base. Having won four seats in its first general election in 1989, it secured seven in the elections of 1994, eleven in 2001, and ten in 2004, eventually seizing political control of the Muslim majority districts in the Eastern Province and de facto primacy in Muslim politics, even though a majority of Sri Lankan Muslims may not have actually voted for the SLMC. With this dominance, the party has been able to contest and expand its power base even in the south, challenging the position of Muslim politicians in the UNP and the SLFP. In an increasingly familiar dilemma in which no single party has been able to gain a simple majority in Parliament, the SLMC has become a key power broker and coalition partner at the national level, gaining cabinet positions that command resources to benefit the Muslim community. In addition, however, the SLMC has given the Muslims of the Eastern and Northern Provinces a voice to independently

articulate their suffering and their demands. Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam argue that the SLMC “is the expression of a collective religious identity which has been reconstituted so as to counter the threat of militant Tamil chauvinism in the North and East” (Ibid.).

Proposals for a Muslim Self-Governing Region

Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this regional agenda and the increased sensitivity to Muslim communal issues has been the renewed call by Muslim politicians, especially the SLMC leadership, for the creation of a Muslim Self-Governing Region to encompass the many noncontiguous Muslim settlement areas in the northeast. The idea of a Muslim Self-Governing Region had been articulated at least from the mid-1980s by Muslim academics and politicians, including the Eastern People’s Muslim Front, as a means of guaranteeing the rights of the community within a possible merged Northeastern Province (Fazil 2004: 180). The popularly received Oluvil Declaration of January 29, 2003, promulgated by Muslim students at South-Eastern University, gave renewed impetus to the MSGR concept. On paper at least, the SLMC has now reappropriated the MSGR goal in order to provide itself and the Muslim community with a territorial power base and a point of leverage to

Muslim politicians...[have called for] a Muslim Self-Governing Region

ensure Muslim concerns will be adequately addressed in any peace negotiations with the LTTE. In theory, an MSGR could be advantageous for multiple reasons. At a symbolic level it would represent a genuine recognition of Muslims’ concerns and political rights, and it would legitimize Muslim negotiations with a unified Tamil-dominated northeastern administration and the state. Assuming that critical powers such as policing, land and irrigation, and education would fall within the MSGR’s mandate, it would offer Muslims the opportunity to administer and manage public resources themselves.

The competitive rationale for an MSGR is that if the Tamils have the right to a separate power-sharing unit, then so do the Muslims, even if the whole issue is merely a bargaining chip. The core territory of the MSGR would be the densely populated Muslim coastal agricultural area in Ampara District, including the towns of Kalmunai, Sammanturai, Nintavur, Akkaraipattu, and Pottuvil (see Map 1). A larger noncontiguous federal unit integrating other Muslim populations in the northeast would presumably include Kattankudy, Eravur, Valaichchenai, and Ottamavadi in Batticaloa District; Mutur, Kinniya, Thampalagamam, and Kuchaveli in

Trincomalee District; and Musali and Erukalampitty in Mannar District. One model proposed for a noncontiguous unit would account for 380,000, or 85 percent, of the 450,000 Muslims in the northeast. Within such a noncontiguous MSGR, the Muslim inhabitants would constitute a majority of 68 percent (NEMPA 2006: 1–2).

The SLMC's current proposal for an MSGR—modeled after the noncontiguous Union Territory of Pondicherry in South India—nevertheless continues to reflect the reactive/conditional nature of Muslim nationalism. It is not clear whether a Muslim Self-Governing Region would even be required if Tamil efforts to unify the Northern and Eastern Provinces prove to be unsuccessful in the long run. At the same time, the Muslim leadership has been careful not to oppose the demands and aspirations of the Tamil community. Many Muslims seem to have a realistic perspective that a territorial merger of some kind in the northeast must be an inevitable part of a political settlement to address Tamil grievances. Muslim support for a merger would depend, however, on assurances that local majority-Muslim areas will have a meaningful degree of political autonomy (Ibid.: 3). In all of this public positioning, Muslim nationalism has borrowed heavily from its Tamil and Sinhala counterparts, mirroring both of them in terms of its territorial claims and its discourses of ethnic autonomy.

However, the MSGR will never be popular among southern Muslims, who fear a Sinhala backlash to such far-reaching territorial demands. Southern Muslims are apprehensive that a separate Muslim “homeland” of any kind in Sri Lanka might some day be used to justify or legitimize a xenophobic call for the ethnic cleansing of the Muslims from these Sinhala areas, just as the LTTE expelled the Muslims from the North in 1990 (Ameer Ali 2004: 381–82). Such a Muslim devolution unit or MSGR could upset the delicately balanced apple cart for Muslims living in the Sinhala areas, and very few of the urban Moors from Colombo or Galle would care to become rural paddy farmers in the east (O'Sullivan 1997).

Neither does the idea of an MSGR have much support from the Sinhala and Tamil political leadership, even though the notion of the Eastern Province having two or more councils to meet the separate needs of the Muslim and Tamil populations has been a part of proposed solutions going as far back as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1957. The underlying principle of Muslim regional self-determination is the desire to be treated as one of the three dominant nationalisms of the country, on par with the expectations of the Sinhalas and the Tamils. According to this logic, any negotiations on the future of the northeast and a stable

peace for the entire island should include the participation of the Muslims as national stakeholders equal to the other communities, rather than as merely an appendage of the official Sri Lankan government delegation.

Unstable Dynamics of Muslim Party Politics

With the establishment of the SLMC, Muslim politics was transformed in numerous ways. Given the eastern farming base of the SLMC, it became increasingly clear that the center of power in Muslim politics was shifting

away from Colombo (Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam 1997) and abandoning some of the established interests previously dominant in southwest Muslim politics. This has generated plausible concerns among Muslims in the southwest that this political shift to the east could antagonize their relations with the majority community in the predominately Sinhala parts of the island. Whether the SLMC's efforts to

*the center of power in
Muslim politics [is] shifting
away from Colombo*

maintain and broaden its strength in the south will force it to temper its advocacy on behalf of the northeastern Muslims is yet to be seen.

Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam also have asserted that "The SLMC behaves as if it is the sole arbiter of Muslims' interests and is therefore duty bound to restore the purest and [most] sacrosanct form of Islam to the people through its propaganda" (Ibid.: 40), but this greatly exaggerates the theological or Islamist content of the SLMC platform. The role of religion in the SLMC has been much more practical and down to earth, as is evident in its voter mobilization efforts to cultivate ties with local mosque committees, a particularly useful tool during election time. It is true that during election campaigns the religious rhetoric has tended to intensify, and in its efforts to strengthen its Islamic credentials the SLMC has opposed certain amendments to Muslim personal law at a cost to women's rights (Ibid.: 40–41). However, in terms of Islamic religious issues, the SLMC's positions typically seek to preserve the status quo without necessarily demanding radical changes either for the cause of ultraconservative or of progressive Muslims.

The SLMC has made very good use of patronage politics in order to strengthen its position, both to improve its electoral gains and to ensure dividends for the leadership and its constituents. In 1994 the party joined the governing People's Alliance, with M. H. M. Ashraff securing the Shipping and Rehabilitation Ministries. During his tenure, Ashraff attempted to develop the east, and particularly the Muslim areas, through

projects including the expansion of the Kalmunai port and the establishment of the South-Eastern University at Oluvil, a Muslim coastal village between Nintavur and Akkaraipattu. In addition, Ashraff ensured an expansion of basic services, including housing for the displaced Muslims of the north residing in refugee camps. Contrary to claims by commentators such as K. M. de Silva, who argue that an exclusive Muslim political party has nothing to offer that Muslim politicians in national political parties cannot provide, it would seem that the SLMC has indeed offered greater options to a particularly disadvantaged section of the Muslim polity. De Silva also claims that the chief interest of Muslims is in preserving their education and cultural rights (K. M. de Silva 1986: 447), when in fact the focus has now become broader and includes issues of political rights and physical security for the northeastern Muslims.

At the same time, however, the SLMC has suffered from party infighting and schismatic tendencies that seem to pervade northeastern Muslim politics, reducing its ability to provide a unified voice to represent the Muslims of the region, particularly following the death of the charismatic Ashraff in a helicopter crash in September 2000. Since then, SLMC leaders have been forced to invest a great deal of time and effort in maintaining and enforcing the unity of the party. Soon after Ashraff's death, the party split when his widow, Ferial Ashraff, and the party's deputy leader, Rauf Hakeem, both vied for the leadership. When Mrs. Ashraff's group lost the battle, she left the party and formed the National Unity Alliance (NUA), perpetuating a familiar Sri Lankan pattern of dynastic succession by political widows.

NUA was itself the brainchild of the late Mr. Ashraff, who before his death was reportedly contemplating going beyond identity politics in order to create a new kind of multiethnic political party. The NUA is recognized as the second major Muslim political party, although it relies on the Sinhala votes in Ampara District to secure its seats. From its inception, NUA has always contested elections as a part of the People's Alliance coalition centered around the Sinhala-oriented SLFP, so the level of independent popular Muslim support for the party is unclear. However, the fact that a woman, Ferial Ashraff, was able to take on the leadership of a Muslim party and remain in that position in the face of Muslim political factionalism is obviously noteworthy, especially since negative gender issues have been raised by SLMC partisans at critical points to undermine her legitimacy. Interestingly, both Rauf Hakeem and Ferial Ashraff have Kandyan family backgrounds, whereas the late Mr. Ashraff, with his roots in Kalmunai, was able to contest in the Eastern Province as a son of the

soil. Family background has been more of a liability than a political resource for Hakeem, in particular, because he seeks to attract Muslim voters from all regions of the island, including the east. The Kandyan issue has also been used negatively by some eastern-born rivals who seek to discredit both Rauf Hakeem and Ferial Ashraff as interlopers. This was a key reason why Hakeem contested from Ampara District rather than from his home district of Kandy in the parliamentary elections of 2004.

In August 2002 six independent-minded SLMC MPs boycotted Parliament to pressure the prime minister to recognize the demand for a separate Muslim Provincial Council in the east (Rupesinghe 2002: 11), and on the eve of the peace talks in Oslo in December 2003, Hakeem had to fly back to Colombo to suppress another wildcat revolt within the SLMC. Ultimately he was unable to prevent M. L. M. Athaullah, an influential MP from Akkaraipattu, from deserting the party. Following the snap general elections of 2004, three more key MPs left the party to join the United People's Freedom Alliance coalition, which won the election but

fell short of a parliamentary majority. These three Muslim MPs eventually created their own separate organization, the All Ceylon Muslim Congress. The fact that these independent-minded Muslim politicians preferred to create their own minuscule political party instead of joining the NUA—itself a break-away faction of the SLMC and a constituent member of the governing United People's Freedom Alliance coalition—reflects the deep schismatic tendencies in current

*political interests
of...Muslim voters are
deeply divided*

Muslim party politics. Each recent election has seen at least one new Muslim political party entering the fray. Although many of these parties consist of disgruntled MPs who are opposed to the SLMC leadership, they seldom coalesce even as a loose Muslim opposition alliance. Instead, each vies to secure the best deal it can get from the government in power and uses its leverage to negotiate deals for personal power and patronage in a manner reminiscent of the switchover politics of Muslim politicians in the 1950s and 1960s. At a deeper level, however, the actions of these renegade Muslim politicians are an unmistakable sign that the political interests of their constituents, the island's regionalized Muslim voters, are deeply divided and situational.

Frustration over this fragmentation of Muslim politics was a critical factor behind the establishment of the Peace Secretariat for Muslims in December 2004. The organization's primary purpose is to document ongoing violations of Muslim civil rights, thus ensuring that Muslim concerns

receive adequate attention during future peace talks with the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the LTTE. The SLMC and the NUA, which created the Peace Secretariat for Muslims in a memorandum of understanding, held an underlying expectation that the organization would provide a means for consensus-building between these two parties and the wider Muslim community. However, the secretariat itself has struggled to define basic principles for a common position, to ensure other Muslim stakeholders are included in it, and to establish an independent identity. This lack of consensus continues to provide an excuse for the government and the LTTE to veto Muslim participation in high-level talks, arguing that no one knows who truly represents the Muslims. The resignation of the secretariat's founding director in 2007 reflected all of these problems and frustrations.

Surprisingly, despite the factionalism and in-fighting, the SLMC has maintained its position as the leading Muslim party since 2001. Whether this represents an outright endorsement of the SLMC leadership and its policies or simply a desire by Muslim voters to have one strong party to represent them is a moot point. Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam insist that "the SLMC's rise to power has taken place without a mass politicization process and therefore remains elite oriented" (Zackariya and Shanmugaratnam 1997). It would seem, however, that northeastern Muslims—having undergone a political mobilization as a result of the Tamil Eelam conflict and the tangible threats to their security—still overwhelmingly vote for the SLMC out of a feeling of regional loyalty to the party.

This regional linkage between the northeastern Muslim electorate and the SLMC has provided the party leadership with a critical advantage in pushing forward key policies. In the 2005 presidential elections, the party was able to endorse Ranil Wickremesinghe of the UNP, who was not the most popular candidate among the Muslims of the northeast. The SLMC justified this endorsement by arguing that a win by Wickremesinghe (instead of the victory that actually went to Mahinda Rajapakse) would guarantee the accreditation of an independent Muslim delegation to any future peace negotiations. Its electoral success to date has permitted the SLMC to claim a popular mandate to represent the Muslim community and to take these issues forward in negotiations with the government and the LTTE. At the same time, President Rajapakse's multiparty coalition government has secured the self-interested support of every Muslim party and political faction, weakening their ability to protest human rights abuses by the armed forces. Although joining the government has forestalled further splits within the SLMC, its future as the principal Muslim party is very much in question. If the leadership of

the SLMC ultimately fragments and dissolves, it could lead to the development of a more pluralistic “alternative Muslim politics,” particularly given the insecure situation of Muslims in the north and east.

Muslims in the Peace Process: 2002–Present

The deep insecurity of Muslim communities in the northeast since the start of the conflict, which dramatically intensified in 1990 after the violent expulsion of the Muslims from the Northern Province and the massacres and land seizures directed by the LTTE against the Muslims on the east coast in particular, made Muslim political leaders determined to participate directly in the peace process following the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002 (CFA). Leading an independent Muslim delegation in the peace negotiations on par with the GOSL and the LTTE became a strategic aim of Muslim political leaders such as Rauf Hakeem of the SLMC, who strongly voiced this demand. The concept was in turn endorsed by influential Muslim community leaders and by civil society organizations. Articulate support for the concept was also provided by non-Muslim commentators (Jeyaraj 2004; Perera 2005) and by at least one eminent cabinet-level Tamil politician (Kadirgamar 2003).

In previous rounds of peace talks in the 1990s, the two sides had attempted to restrict the Muslims to a consultative role at best, with the net effect of minimizing Muslim participation, denying them parity of status, and marginalizing Muslim constitutional concerns. Although the intensified campaign for high-level Muslim representation by the SLMC leadership following the CFA in 2002 eventually achieved some success “in principle,” the two main parties to the conflict—the GOSL and the LTTE—never granted the Muslim leadership their fundamental demand: to be actively included as an independent equal party to the peace process. By mid-2006 the entire “peace process” had dissolved, and the LTTE and the government were once again at war. However, an overview of Muslim efforts during this period to achieve high-level participation reveals the political obstacles and binary ethnonationalist thinking that will continue to hamper any future initiatives for Muslim participation in negotiations between the GOSL and the LTTE.

The Prabhakaran-Hakeem Accord

Broadly speaking, the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE hold quite different views on the question of Muslim representation. From the government’s standpoint, the Muslims are Sri Lankan citizens represented by elected MPs and political parties; they are not a diplomatic or military entity external to the nation-state. Any government, especially a multiparty coalition, would wish to involve its own Muslim MPs and ministers in the

peace process rather than an independent Muslim delegation or a third party with its own agenda. From the standpoint of the LTTE, on the other hand, the Muslims are not coalition partners, electoral allies, or fellow citizens; they are ethnic rivals and demographic competitors for territorial control of Tamil Eelam. Unless they can muster combatants on the ground, the Muslims do not fit the LTTE's definition of a party to the conflict, thus they cannot be regarded as having a legitimate right to enter into direct negotiations between the two warring sides. Making a subtle linguistic distinction, the LTTE has said that the Muslims are entitled to "representation" but not to formal participation as an actual (i.e., military) protagonist in the peace process. This stance also has been reflected in the dominant Tamil nationalist parliamentary position, prompting Muslims to rhetorically ask whether they must take up arms in order to secure a place at the table.

For its part, the Muslim community has asked to be treated as a fundamental stakeholder, because any peace settlement must respond to the needs of the victims, not merely to the demands of the perpetrators, of violence. In other words, because the conflict has led to the victimization of all three ethnic communities, the Muslims too have a political claim to redress and security. The key negotiating issues for the Muslims are to secure the safety of human life, to regain lost property and land, to guarantee the right of return for the Muslims expelled from the Northern Province, to resettle internally displaced persons, to provide compensation for loss and damage to property, and to devolve political power based on local self-determination for Muslims in any future administrative structure (Mohideen 2006: 322). On a more pragmatic level, many Muslims in the northeast correctly insist that the conflict is based on ethnic grievances and aspirations that can only be addressed through a consensus of all three ethnic communities in the region (NEMPA 2006: 1). All of these arguments have been used to support the Muslim demand to participate fully and directly in peace talks, even when the issue has been used as a bargaining chip to gain more immediate objectives, such as Muslim representation in key administrative structures. Although broad support exists among Muslims for a separate Muslim delegation, members of the community disagree as to whether it must be the first step or whether incremental representation and involvement in peace talks can be used as a tool for securing full participation further down the line.

***Muslim[s] demand to
participate fully and
directly in peace talks***

Going into the peace process in 2002, the LTTE seemed initially prepared to recognize the suffering of the Muslims and even their separate identity as a political and cultural community in the northeast. LTTE spokesman Anton Balasingham, in response to a question at a press conference about the 1990 expulsion of the entire population of northern Muslims and the massacres in Kattankudy and Eravur, stated: "It is I who made an apology to the Muslim people for what has happened in the past and that we are willing to talk to them and resolve these issues." Without making an explicit apology, the LTTE seemingly expressed regret and a willingness to address the consequences and repercussions of their actions. Balasingham, speaking on behalf of the LTTE leadership, also expressed a desire to engage in direct talks with the SLMC to address the Muslim community's problems and to resolve the conflict: "It is very important that the questions of the Muslim people are resolved along with the question of the Tamil people" (Balasingham 2002).

In the preamble to the CFA document, the Muslims were identified as a stakeholder but "not directly party to the conflict," thereby granting them some recognition but also limiting their involvement in the peace process. Despite an independent agreement between the SLMC and the LTTE that seemed to allow for Muslim participation, the Norwegian representatives coordinating the negotiations eventually announced that the LTTE was unwilling to deliver on their promise. In allowing this to occur, the Norwegian facilitators and the Sri Lankan government once again exhibited their familiar bipolar conflict resolution outlook in focusing exclusively on the two main parties to the conflict, the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militants. Such Norwegian-brokered efforts to keep the LTTE on board by catering to their narrowly focused negotiating preferences has had negative repercussions for the Muslim community throughout the entire peace process.

Frustrated by the procedural maneuvering, Muslim leaders felt that face-to-face engagement was required. This prompted the SLMC leadership from the early stages of the peace process to forge a direct link with the LTTE. In a dramatic move at peacemaking, the SLMC and LTTE held direct negotiations on April 13, 2002, to discuss the problems between the two communities and to identify a way forward. Following the meeting between V. Prabhakaran and Rauf Hakeem, an agreement was reached on a gamut of issues. During the meeting Prabhakaran facilitated normalization by inviting the northern Muslims to return to the North, allowing the Muslims to cultivate their lands in the northeast, and ending LTTE taxes in the eastern region. Negotiators also envisaged multiple mechanisms for dialogue at the district level between representatives of the SLMC and the LTTE in order to deal with specific problems and the continuation of

high-level meetings. Critically, they called for the SLMC party leadership to represent the entire Muslim community in negotiations between the government and the LTTE. This agreement appeared to mark a major achievement for the Muslim community and for the SLMC—at both a symbolic and a substantive level—providing a starting point to address the pressing problems of the community. It also established a diplomatic precedent by having the LTTE leader Prabhakaran directly participate in face-to-face negotiations with his counterpart in the SLMC, the sort of public role Prabhakaran had not played in any previous episodes of the peace process.

Unfortunately, communal suspicions and personal rivalries soon came into play on both sides, creating a series of crises that quickly led to a deterioration of relations. To begin with, the agreement recognizing the primacy of the SLMC as the designated representative of the Muslim community appeared to mirror the LTTE's controversial claim to be the "sole representative" of the Tamil people, so rival Muslim political camps immediately objected. Then, statements in early 2002 attributed to the LTTE senior commander in the east, Karikalan, to the effect that the Muslims possessed no land rights and a simultaneous expansion of taxation of the Muslim community by the LTTE led to pressures and renewed Muslim fears. Although the LTTE reportedly summoned Karikalan for an inquiry, and the agreement between Prabhakaran and Hakeem still promised an end to taxation and a mechanism to deal with Muslim grievances, the situation on the ground steadily worsened, placing tremendous strains on Muslim-Tamil relations. In June 2002 violence flared up in Mutur and Valaichchenai, leading to the abduction of thirteen Muslims and the destruction of more than 150 million rupees worth of property (Mohideen 2006: 513). Although some characterized it as localized communal friction, others pointed to an LTTE hand in the violence, particularly in the abductions. It raised concerns about the desire—or even the ability—of the LTTE top leadership to control its eastern cadres. There are indications that the Muslim issue was highly contentious between the eastern command of the LTTE and the leadership based in the Vanni (the region of the Northern Province immediately south of the Jaffna Peninsula), reflecting a wider power struggle within the LTTE itself. The fact that violence and intimidation also took place in Trincomalee, outside Karikalan's area of command, raised questions as to how far the leadership in the Vanni was aware of, and in control of, what was happening (Jeyaraj 2002).

Hakeem's request for a meeting with Prabhakaran in the aftermath of the violence was ignored, raising further concerns about the commitment of the LTTE leadership to the agreement. As D. B. S. Jeyaraj noted, "The

greatest disappointment in the Muslim perception was that a pledge given by Prabhakaran himself had been dishonoured. The fate of the Prabhakaran-Hakeem accord was becoming in the Muslim eyes a symbol of Tamil betrayal” (Jeyaraj 2002). This resulted in a sober reevaluation of direct engagement between Muslim political leaders and the Tamil Tigers, and with the LTTE leader in particular, because Prabhakaran had failed to fulfill his commitments. Since then, the LTTE has extended invitations to a number of Muslim political and civil society leaders to come to Kilinochchi for talks, but as Ferial Ashraff reportedly told the LTTE delegation at Geneva in February 2006, they do not wish to face the same experience as Rauf Hakeem.

Practical Realities of the Peace Process for the Muslims

After several months of delays, peace talks between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE commenced in Thailand on September 16, 2002. The unraveling of the Prabhakaran-Hakeem agreement and other developments within the peace process had effectively placed the issue of independent “parity of status” for the Muslims on hold, so SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem instead attended the first round of talks as a member of the Sri Lankan government delegation. In the sessions that followed, the Muslims continued to be represented on the government team by Hakeem, who brought in key resource people from the Muslim community. At the fourth session of talks in January 2003, an Official Joint Statement asserted that an independent Muslim delegation would be allowed to participate “at an appropriate time for deliberations on relevant substantive political issues.” This language made it clear that a separate Muslim delegation would be admitted only when immediate Muslim humanitarian or political needs were to be addressed. Although it was clear that the LTTE had become uncomfortable with the idea of a separate Muslim delegation, it also appears that the SLMC leadership found Muslim participation in the Sri Lankan government delegation politically advantageous because they continued to participate in the talks.

Nevertheless, during these GOSL-LTTE negotiations, attempts were made to address some of the immediate concerns identified in the Prabhakaran-Hakeem accord. Just as the LTTE emphasized the concerns and immediate needs of Tamil civilians in the conflict-affected areas, so Hakeem and other delegates on the Sri Lankan government team took up issues affecting the Muslims living in the northeast. They highlighted the issue of the return of land and property belonging to the Muslim community, which prompted the LTTE to call for the preparation of a registry of

all such Muslim lands. Hakeem asked M. I. M. Mohideen of the Muslim Rights Organization to take up the task. The Land Registry was completed in November 2003 and presented to all the concerned parties, thus obligating the LTTE to facilitate the process of turning over occupied lands. The issue of land disputes between Tamils and Muslims in the east was also addressed in the fifth session of peace talks, during which the parties decided to establish joint LTTE-Muslim district committees, facilitated by the Government Peace Secretariat, in each of the three districts in the Eastern Province (Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara). These district committees reportedly proved successful in securing the release of 25 percent of the Muslim lands and property on the Land Registry held by the LTTE (Mohideen 2006: 324). In an effort to strengthen local dialogue and revive high-level negotiations between the Muslims and the LTTE, an understanding was reached in the sixth session of the peace talks for a meeting in Batticaloa between local LTTE and Muslim leaders, as well as for talks in Kilinochchi that would take up the issue of full Muslim participation in the peace process (Balasingham 2004: 429).

Thus, despite the nonimplementation of the Prabhakaran-Hakeem accord and the denial of an independent Muslim delegation, the peace talks did provide a useful channel for dialogue between the Muslims and the LTTE. Negotiators also made efforts to ensure Muslim representation on every subcommittee that was set up to address specific topics (e.g., normalization, rehabilitation, and gender issues). Nevertheless, the administrative dynamics within the committees, especially with regards to the Subcommittee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs—a hybrid GOSL/LTTE relief and reconstruction coordinating agency located in Kilinochchi—reinforced a perception of Muslim marginalization.

The peace talks abruptly ended with the LTTE's unilateral decision to suspend its participation in April 2003 in the wake of its exclusion from the Donor Conference in Washington, D.C. An optimist could argue that, as a byproduct of the negotiations, the future right to an independent Muslim peace delegation was secured "in principle." The LTTE later acknowledged a Muslim right of participation in the Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal they submitted to the government in November 2003. According to the ISGA document, Muslims were to "have the right to participate in formulation of their role in the ISGA," wording that was admittedly not very specific. A stronger sign of their enhanced stakeholder status was the fact that inclusion of a Muslim delegation in the peace process was made one of the benchmarks by the donors at the Tokyo Donor Conference in June 2003 for the release of

US\$4.5 billion in aid, demonstrating the international community's recognition of Muslim concerns.

However, the inclusion of Rauf Hakeem as an official Sri Lankan government representative, as opposed to his leading an independent Muslim delegation, did raise hackles within the Muslim community. The SLMC leadership found itself critiqued both from within the party and from without for key choices it had made. For instance, the forum known as Muslim Parliamentarians for Peace that had been established to ensure interparty consultation across the entire Muslim leadership was not included in the formulation of the Prabhakaran-Hakeem accord. Instead, the agreement ensured SLMC primacy, arguably at the expense of a wider consensus among Muslim parties. Criticism grew even from within the SLMC, particularly in the wake of the violence in June 2002 that made it increasingly difficult for Hakeem to build on some of the agreed initiatives in the short term. There were serious concerns about the SLMC's commitment to securing an independent delegation, let alone a joint delegation, or whether it was really just about the SLMC's exclusive right to represent the Muslims at the peace talks. That the SLMC did not threaten to leave the governing coalition to force the government to take up the Muslim parity issue, and that it remained compliant with the government's peace agenda, suggests that the SLMC leaders believed collaboration and compromise at the peace talks would deliver benefits of some kind. Then the LTTE scrubbed the negotiations, leaving observers to wonder how successful the SLMC's collaboration on the government team might have been.

Meanwhile, the "no war, no peace" situation ushered in by the 2002 CFA initially created an environment conducive to greater normalization, return of the displaced, and rehabilitation of communities and infrastructure. Although all three of Sri Lanka's ethnic communities faced common problems—such as interethnic land conflicts, refugee assistance, land mines, and unexploded ordnance—the Muslim community faced some unique issues that required the LTTE to take critical steps to address their specific humanitarian needs in the northeastern region.

The experience of the 90,000 Muslims forcibly evicted by the LTTE from the Northern Province in October 1990, many of whom are still living in displacement camps near Puttalam today, is a vivid case in point. The invitation in 2002 by LTTE leader Prabhakaran to the northern Muslims to return, as well as Anton Balasingham's "apology," provided a required and suitable starting point for the return of the expelled. However, despite the resettlement packages offered by the LTTE and an expressed desire on the part of Muslims to return, the actual rate of return to the Northern Province has been low. In this respect, the displaced

northern Muslims are similar to the Tamil refugees currently living in south India who are eager to return but are unwilling to do so until peace is stabilized. Local LTTE leaders have not engaged in confidence-building steps such as visiting the returnee communities at an official level or publicly condemning acts of violence against Muslims. Muslim returnees (depending on their place of origin) were barred by the LTTE from certain trades, or were subject to LTTE “back-payment” demands for the maintenance of lands they had seized. The LTTE often left it to the Muslim returnees themselves to negotiate with secondary occupants for the return of their properties. Coupled with this was the “low return trap,” where foreign donors were unwilling to fund Muslim development projects in the north due to the low rate of return, and prospective returnees were reluctant to return because of the lack of investment in these projects. In such ways, the peace process only reinforced the Muslim expulsion, ensuring that northern areas that had been ethnically cleansed in 1990 would remain so. The appointment of the Tamil Tiger officer Illamparithi—who was reported to have given the original expulsion notice to the Jaffna Muslims in 1990—as political wing leader for Jaffna further undermined the LTTE’s credibility with the displaced northern Muslims.

The return of Muslim lands and property throughout the north and east was a clear expectation of the Prabhakaran-Hakeem accord, and the land committees created by the peace talks made some headway. Nevertheless, Muslims increasingly perceived the LTTE to be holding on to some of the land it had seized in order to rent it out to Tamil farmers, or to be unwilling to become involved in mediating property conflicts that it had helped to create. In turn, the LTTE claimed that the issue of Muslim property was only part of wider land problems in the northeast caused by the lack of legal documentation to prove original ownership rights.

Alternative Peacemaking: NEMPA and Muslim Civil Society Initiatives

Faced with the sluggish pace of developments on the ground and paralysis in engagement between the LTTE and the SLMC, an alternative means of dialogue emerged between Muslim civil society organizations and the LTTE in the east. The efforts at creating district level mechanisms for communication had demonstrated the advantages of dealing with local problems locally without linking them to broader political issues. Although this afforded a

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breakthrough by addressing concrete problems on the ground through multitrack peacebuilding, it also raised questions regarding the proper role of civil society leadership within the Muslim community.

Following the suspension of peace talks in 2003, the LTTE expressed an interest in hearing the concerns of the Muslims directly. This created an opening that led to the formation of the North-East Muslim Peace Assembly (NEMPA) in September 2003 (Mohideen 2006: 324). Following a meeting between NEMPA representatives and LTTE political leaders in the east, the two parties signed an agreement September 22, 2003, to create “zonal committees” between the LTTE and Muslims of the Eastern Province to facilitate alternate dispute resolution (Ibid.: 326). In this initial meeting, the representatives agreed that confiscated paddy lands in LTTE-controlled Ampara and Batticaloa Districts were to be handed back to Muslim owners, while all restrictions on paddy cultivation, fishing, and movement of Muslims in the LTTE-controlled east were to be removed (Ibid.: 324–25). On December 22 a meeting was held in Trincomalee to devise similar steps there. The Foundation for Co-Existence, headed by Kumar Rupesinghe, played a crucial role in the formation of NEMPA, and it also had a critical role in facilitating meetings between NEMPA and the LTTE.

This so-called “track II” civil society engagement offered a critical avenue for the Muslim community to address immediate problems. It promised the removal of economic restrictions and the return of land, and over successive months the zonal committees are said to have produced some successful results. Killing due to intercommunal violence, which had reached as high as two per day, dramatically dropped following the establishment of track II dialogue, and the chairman of NEMPA has claimed this was a direct result of these dispute-mediation efforts (Ibid.: 325). Thus, a critical aspect of the Hakeem-Prabhakaran accord was taken up by new organizations such as NEMPA that brought together local Muslim community leaders willing to work on practical, case-by-case solutions to Muslim issues.

However, this process in effect circumvented the existing Muslim political party leadership, creating new tensions within the Muslim community. Indeed, there were concerns that the LTTE was deliberately using the Muslim civil society sector in order to marginalize the elected Muslim political leadership, in effect demonstrating that a high-level delegation comprised of Muslim politicians was not needed to deal with some of the most pressing Muslim grievances. The slow movement in the turnover of land and the continuing economic restrictions imposed by the LTTE, cou-

pled with the high visibility meetings that were covered in the media, were perceived by some to be more about photo opportunities than about substantial progress, ironically mimicking the very same complaints made by the LTTE of the GOSL (Haniffa and Raheem 2005). In retrospect, the correlation between the timing of the NEMPA initiative and the sharp drop in violence may have been the result of a shift in strategy by the eastern LTTE command, which under the leadership of Colonel Karuna broke away from the mainstream LTTE in 2004. Although the tangible results of the NEMPA initiative have been questioned (International Crisis Group 2007: 10), NEMPA's work did suggest an alternative approach to crisis management and problem-solving through village and district-level dialogue—a possible way to circumvent the constant blockages and stalemates in the peace process at the national level.

Radicalization and the Potential for Muslim Militancy in the Eastern Province

A striking development in the growth and articulation of Muslim nationalism was the Oluvil Declaration of January 29, 2003, which justified an autonomous Muslim homeland in the east. A group of Muslim students at South-Eastern University in Oluvil, clearly inspired by the Tamil nationalist Vaddukoddai Declaration of 1976 that formally enunciated the vision of Tamil Eelam, argued that Sri Lankan Muslims have (1) a separate ethnic identity, (2) a “traditional homeland” on the east coast, (3) a right of self-determination to decide their political destiny, and (4) a right to have the territory predominantly inhabited by Muslims demarcated and protected in any long-term political solution. The declaration also called for the social, political, economic, and cultural rights of Muslims living outside the northeast to be ensured. From a Muslim nationalist position, the declaration marked a crucial moment: “The Oluvil Declaration declares that this [South-Eastern] political unit will define the Muslim nation” (Jeyaraj 2003: 14). The fact that the declaration was made before an audience reportedly 60,000-strong suggests the level of interest this move generated among Muslims on the east coast. Elements of the Oluvil Declaration have now been incorporated into the SLMC platform, presumably to forestall a loss of support from the more mobilized and radical elements within the northeastern Muslim polity.

*the Oluvil Declaration...
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Insecurity within the northern and eastern Muslim regions has been a critical factor promoting the development of such proposals for Muslim territorial autonomy and calls for increased Muslim militancy. “Killings, abductions, torture and extortion by LTTE cadres, which are clear violations of the ceasefire agreement, go unabated in the northeast region despite warning and pleading from both national and international organizations. The victimized communities are demanding weapons to defend themselves, as they are losing faith in state protection” (Mohideen 2006: 318–19). Starting in the 1990s the state recruited Muslim Home Guard units to provide protection for Muslim villages and neighborhoods in the east. Since then, the government has further strengthened these Home Guard units, thus increasing the tensions between the community and the LTTE.

Such conditions of physical insecurity, coupled with marginalization at the peace talks and factionalism in Muslim parliamentary politics, suggest an environment that could eventually foster radicalism and armed Muslim militancy in the northeast. The Sri Lankan popular press has made periodic references to Islamic fundamentalism and to Muslim militancy, as if the two terms could be used interchangeably. However, the process of Muslim political mobilization and radicalization is not currently driven by an Islamist agenda, even though local fundamentalist sympathizers as well as

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armed Muslim youths are known to exist in the eastern region. The Tamil media in 2002 and 2003, for instance, spoke of an “Osama Front” that was reported to be active in Mutur. In 2006 during the Geneva negotiations between the government and the LTTE, Anton Balasingham alleged that an armed group called Jihad was functioning in the east, setting off a wave of claims and denials. Given the availability of weapons in the east, the equipping and training of Muslim civilians

by Tamil militant groups and by the Sri Lankan state, and the chronic levels of insecurity, it would not be surprising if such armed Muslim gangs had formed, probably even some with ties to local politicians or party factions; but this activity falls well-short of a radicalized Muslim resistance movement. A recent report by the University Teachers for Human Rights speaks of east coast “jihadis” in a vague and inconsistent fashion, further confusing the picture (University Teachers for Human Rights 2007).

At the same time, however, there are recurrent reports of locally based gangs of armed Muslim youths in certain Muslim towns such as

Kattankudy, Mutur, Valaichchenai, and Akkaraipattu, including shadowy groups with an apparent Salafist orientation that have destroyed shrines of Muslim saints and attacked followers of local Sufi sheikhs. In particular, press reports have highlighted a spate of intracommunity violence in 2006 and 2007 between Islamic fundamentalists and Sufi mystics in the town of Kattankudy in Batticaloa District (Balachandran 2007; International Crisis Group 2007: 22–25). The possibility that this intrareligious violence might one day give rise to armed Islamist movements in Sri Lanka is obviously a source of concern. The media tends to describe all of these armed youth as jihadis, even though it is not clear they are Islamist in nature. However, having to constantly reassure the media and the international community that there are no Taliban-style radicals or suicidal jihadis, and that to date no recorded Afghan or Al-Qaeda trained Muslim militants have operated on the island (Ismail, Abdullah, and Fazil 2004b: 198, 200), puts Sri Lankan Muslims on the defensive and gives them good reason to downplay the existence of any armed religious groups.

Any widespread Muslim militancy comparable to the Tamil guerrilla movements of the early 1980s that directly challenged mainstream Tamil politicians has yet to emerge, but some analysts are predicting that such a development could be in the offing, given the scale of violence and the rhetoric of frustration and anger within the Muslim community. Others dispute this claim, pointing to the high level of democratic political activity and the socioeconomic factors that would make such a movement potentially self-defeating. “So far, however, no systematized Muslim militant movement has emerged. There is simply no climate for it among the Muslims. Incidents periodically took place among individuals, but organized violence did not occur” (Ibid. 2004a: 161). Nevertheless, the development of the Tamil militant groups serves as a warning for the Muslim community, as these groups were tolerated and even given political space by the mainstream Tamil parties, which ultimately became victims of the militants. Ultimately, if mainstream Muslim politicians fail to deliver a workable solution in the northeast, the emergence of Muslim militancy may not be unthinkable, but as of now, moderate Muslim politics dominates at a macro level and appears to have isolated and contained local militancy of either the ethnic separatist or the Islamist religious type.

Post-Tsunami Relief for the Muslims

As if the community had not already suffered enough from the Eelam conflict, Muslims accounted for roughly a third of the victims of the December 26, 2004, tsunami. Approximately 43 percent of Sri Lanka’s 31,147 tsunami deaths occurred in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts alone,

with fatalities heaviest along the Muslim-dominated Kalmunai coastal corridor in Ampara District (Map 1, McGilvray 2006). In addition to the human tragedy, the tsunami also had significant political and social implications, because it immediately raised questions about the speed and equitable distribution of resources for post-tsunami relief to the Tamils and Muslims in the northeast.

Responding to the humanitarian challenges of the tsunami, the GOSL and the LTTE took immediate measures to negotiate an aid-sharing mechanism. After six months of protracted negotiations, the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) agreement was signed on June 24, 2005. It was the first agreement signed between the two warring parties since the CFA in 2002, and it promised an opportunity to restart the stalled peace process through engaging in essential reconstruction work. A constitutional challenge to the P-TOMS, however, resulted in its legal suspension and ultimate nonimplementation. Developments over this period had significant implications for the Muslim community, as the issues of ethnic inclusion and marginalization once more came to the fore.

After the tsunami, Muslims were acknowledged to be Sri Lanka's "most affected community," but the tsunami disaster exacerbated feelings of marginalization among the Muslim community and intensified their politicization (Haniffa 2005). Muslim coastal communities that had been congested even before the tsunami were unable to find alternative land to rebuild houses. Faced with an exclusionary P-TOMS negotiation process

between the GOSL and the LTTE, the Muslim community demanded the right to participate (Raheem 2005). Invoking the very same logic they had used to protest their exclusion during the 2002 peace process, Muslim leaders argued for the right to actively participate because of the severe impact of the tsunami on their community. Because the proposed P-TOMS mechanism would be responsible for the planning of a recovery program and the disbursement of funds for the entire northeastern

coastline, including GOSL and LTTE-controlled regions, Muslims were genuinely fearful that the arrangement would not take their specific concerns into account. As the negotiations progressed, however, the government strictly adhered to its previous policies of speaking on behalf of the Muslim community, although the impact of the tragedy and its aftermath greatly raised the profile of the Muslim issue, particularly with the international community. Consultation with Muslim political leaders, sand-

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wiched between meetings with the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, became obligatory for visiting international dignitaries. Norwegian Special Envoy Eric Solheim made his very first visit to the resettlement camps of the expelled northern Muslims in Puttalam in April 2005.

Although P-TOMS was never implemented, it offered some benefits “in principle” for the Muslim community: the proposed three-tier P-TOMS mechanism would have provided for Muslim representation at all levels, with equal status at the apex level. One of the main criticisms of P-TOMS, however, was that it replicated a key problem already experienced by Muslims participating in the Subcommittee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs—the concentration of Tamil (LTTE) power in Kilinochchi, the political headquarters of the LTTE. It also would have created district level P-TOMS committees with ethnic representation calculated from district-wide, rather than subdistrict, demographics, thus disenfranchising the Muslim settlements tightly concentrated along the eastern coastline and most in need of assistance. Although the inclusion of Muslims in the formal P-TOMS organizational framework was acknowledged to be an important symbolic gesture, it was understandable why P-TOMS aroused fears that Muslims would be marginalized from the actual post-tsunami resource-allocation decisions affecting the northeastern Muslim community (Haniffa 2005).

Muslims in a Situation of Renewed War

The level of interethnic violence dropped following the tsunami, but the pattern of killings and abductions gradually returned, especially in the east, aggravated by the armed mutiny of the Karuna Group against the LTTE Vanni leadership in March 2004. Following the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse and the “Mahaveera” (Heros’ Day) speech of LTTE leader Prabhakaran in November 2005, the security situation on the ground deteriorated quite rapidly to a state of “undeclared war” between the GOSL and the LTTE, despite the fact that neither side formally renounced the Ceasefire Agreement. The outcome of ongoing military campaigns is uncertain at the present time (August 2007), but there are indications that the LTTE has lost control over areas it formerly occupied in the east. Such changes will obviously affect the political dynamics of Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala intercommunity relations in these regions, but it is too early to predict the final outcome of a struggle that has witnessed dramatic fluctuations in the military balance over the past two decades. However, the two-year lead-up to the current situation has clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of the Muslim community in a context of rapidly

escalating violence, and it has once again revealed how easily the Muslims are excluded from the conversation when the two military combatants train their guns upon each other.

In a last ditch effort to preserve the ceasefire and salvage the peace process, the parties met in Geneva in February 2006 to review the implementation of the CFA. Once more the issue of Muslim participation came up, and once again neither the Sri Lankan government nor the LTTE were sympathetic to Muslim concerns. The government of President Rajapakse made it clear that Muslim representation was not automatic and would require negotiation, just as it challenged other assumptions of the peace process, such as the consolidated Northern and Eastern Provinces as the unit of devolution. Nevertheless, the government felt the need to appoint one Muslim representative to its Geneva delegation, Faiz Mustapha, who was then replaced under pressure by NUA leader and cabinet minister Ferial Ashraff. Although she tried to clarify her position as a member of the government delegation who happened to be a Muslim, rather than being the “Muslim representative” for the talks, Ashraff too came under criticism from the SLMC and the Muslim Council, an influential Muslim non-governmental organization, which questioned her right to speak for all of Sri Lanka’s Muslims in Geneva. Ultimately, the Geneva talks collapsed, as neither party sought to implement the peace agreement, and the armed conflict further intensified. Once again, however, the internal schisms and deep factionalism of the Muslim parliamentary leadership had been dramatized for everyone to see.

Meanwhile, throughout 2005–07 in areas of the northeast, Muslim civilians found themselves targeted alternatively by the LTTE, by the Sri Lankan armed forces, and by the breakaway eastern faction of the LTTE headed by Colonel Karuna. A report by the International Crisis Group

notes that Sri Lanka’s Muslims are presently “caught in the crossfire” between the government and the Tamil militants (International Crisis Group 2007). The fratricidal struggle between the LTTE and the Karuna Group has posed an especially difficult challenge for the Muslims, not only by escalating the general level of daily violence but also by further complicat-

*Muslims are... “caught
in the crossfire”*

ing the Muslim community’s already tense relations with the LTTE, harkening back to the mosque massacres of 1990. Given the harassment Muslims earlier faced under the LTTE, they felt some initial sympathy for the Karuna Group. Yet, given that his own cadres originated from within the LTTE, and considering Karuna’s own personal history of ethnic vio-

lence, no harmonious relationship with the Muslims has yet emerged from the Karuna rebellion. In fact the government's short-term reliance on the Karuna Group to defeat the LTTE militarily and to maintain security on the ground has led the government to give the group *carte blanche* in the east. Tamil civilians as well as Muslims have been at the receiving end of the group's violence, as the Karuna Group seeks to establish its hegemony in the east, particularly in Batticaloa. The complex ambiguity of the situation was illustrated by an incident on November 18, 2005, when a grenade was lobbed into the Akkaraipattu Grand Mosque during early morning prayers, killing six men. According to the LTTE, it was simply a treacherous anti-Muslim attack carried out by the Karuna Group. According to an opposing view, however, the killings were done by the LTTE in retaliation against Akkaraipattu Muslims who had given the Karuna Group shelter and protection from their LTTE rivals. More recently, in January 2007, the Muslims of Kattankudy have accused the Karuna Group and its political wing, the Tamil People's Liberation Tigers (*Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal*), of intimidation and harassment. To date, neither of these two rival Tamil militant groups has been able to find genuine common ground with the Muslims in the north and east.

The vulnerability of Muslims trapped in the path of escalating Sri Lankan military operations and LTTE counterattacks was starkly evident in the Trincomalee District town of Mutur in spring 2006. Here, Muslims were victims of violence from the Sri Lankan security forces, from the LTTE, and even from Sinhala mobs rioting in Trincomalee Town (Raheem 2006). The LTTE's closure of a strategic irrigation channel at Mavil Aru triggered a counterattack by the Sri Lankan Army to regain control of the anicut in late July. The LTTE then launched their own counterstrike to gain control of the Muslim town of Mutur, to which the government responded in full force. The Muslims of Mutur were caught directly in the crossfire, with both sides firing into built up neighborhoods and artillery barrages damaging schools, mosques, and even the Mutur hospital. At least 50 Muslim civilians were killed, and a further 45,000 were forced to evacuate the town. The efforts of Muslim parliamentarians and civil society officials to persuade the army to stop the shelling of Mutur failed, raising questions as to whether Muslims could rely on the government for their security. At the same time, the LTTE's attempted interrogations and abductions of Muslims while they were fleeing en masse from Mutur made it clear that the LTTE's guarantees were equally meaningless. The subsequent Muslim experiences of GOSL emergency aid and resettlement relief seemed to reflect a lack of urgency on the part of a Sinhala-dominated bureaucracy primarily concerned with possible long-term demographic

changes to the ethnic balance of Sinhala settlements in the vicinity of Muttur. In the minds of some Muslims, this episode, and the brutal killing soon thereafter of ten Muslim men in the Sinhala village of Radella near Pottuvil, raised deeper questions about why Muslim government ministers were talking merely about securing compensation for the victims rather than challenging the Sri Lankan government's failure to protect their fundamental human rights in the first place. Whether the context is war, peace, or no war, no peace, the critical challenge for the Muslim community will be to ensure that their rights to security and a peaceful livelihood are protected by multiple methods.

Conclusion

Taking a broad view of the matter, it is important to acknowledge some of the achievements of the Muslims in the peace process following the CFA in 2002. In particular, they secured the right in principle to participate in peace negotiations, although they were not included as equal partners in the talks in practice. Furthermore, the appointment of Muslim politicians and officials, although mostly as members of the Sri Lankan government delegation and as members of various subcommittees, created an important precedent. The future participation of an independent Muslim delegation in the peace talks was made an explicit benchmark by the international community at the Tokyo donor conference for the disbursement of aid to Sri Lanka, and the (never-implemented) P-TOMS administrative structure explicitly recognized the necessity

of a Muslim role in the distribution of tsunami relief. The peace process served as a critical period for the Muslim community in the east to mobilize around the concept of a self-governing region, while Muslim civil society initiatives were developed to address Muslim-Tamil disputes at the grassroots level.

Nevertheless, the Muslims made very little tangible progress in securing an active and direct role in negotiations with the LTTE and the GOSL following the commencement of the peace process. Following the signing of the CFA, the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from the peace talks can be seen as an extension of the ethnic majoritarian politics practiced by successive Sri Lankan governments, and equally so by Tamil nationalist politicians and the LTTE pursuing a unified Northeastern

[Muslims have]...secured the right in principle to participate in peace negotiations

Province (or an exclusive Tamil Eelam). Following the election of President Rajapakse, the relevance of some of the achievements of the Muslim community in the peace process are in further doubt, as are some of the other basic assumptions relating to the peace process such as a merged North and East.

Why has the Muslim community been unable to exert a greater degree of political influence in the ethnic conflict, and more specifically why has it been unable to play the role of a constitutionally equal ethnic stakeholder in Sri Lanka's peace process? As described above, the underlying historical and sociological reasons—encompassing factors internal to the Sri Lankan Muslim community as well as external constraints imposed by Sri Lanka's larger ethnonationalist political environment—include:

1. The Muslim minority is small (8 percent of the total population), urban-based, and geographically dispersed, with one key exception: the dense settlements of Muslim farmers and fishermen located in the northeastern territorial heartland of the Tamil separatist movement for Tamil Eelam (Map 1). This has generated a wide diversity of localized Muslim needs and political priorities in response to the surrounding ethnic milieu—Sinhala-speaking in the southwest and Tamil-speaking in the northeast—that cannot easily be condensed into a single island-wide Muslim political aspiration or platform. The demographic issue has provided a convenient excuse to ignore Muslims' pivotal role in the northeast and exclude them from peace negotiations.
2. Efforts to construct a more effective and unifying ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Tamils and Sinhalese resulted first in an Arab ("Moorish") racial narrative, then a one-dimensional religious label as "Muslims." In the context of twentieth century Sri Lankan ethnonationalism, these terms were well-suited to a pattern of Muslim "defensive" politics. They largely reflected the interests of urban and commercial elites in the southwest who pursued advantageous coalition alliances with the mainstream Sinhala parties while avoiding the need to irretrievably choose sides in the ethnic conflict. This balancing act became more difficult to sustain in the context of an increasingly Sinhala nationalist state and a militant Tamil secessionist movement in the north and east.
3. The outbreak of warfare and interethnic violence as a result of the Tamil secessionist campaign for an independent homeland (Tamil Eelam) in the northeast of the island in the 1980s suddenly placed the Muslims concentrated in certain northeastern districts

(Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar, and Jaffna) in physical as well as political jeopardy. Muslims created ethnic/nationalist political parties (especially the SLMC) to protect their interests and at the same time to rally Sri Lankan Muslims under a common banner. This appears to have forestalled the development of militant Muslim movements, but it may also prove to have hindered the growth of pluralistic Muslim democratic politics.

4. In the wake of the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002, Muslim political leaders such as Rauf Hakeem of the SLMC sought to claim an independent Muslim seat at the highest level in peace negotiations between the GOSL and the LTTE. However, a deeply entrenched ethnonationalist outlook on the part of the government and the Tamil Tigers continues to view the situation through a narrow Sinhala vs. Tamil lens that marginalizes Muslims and disregards them as strategic stakeholders in a long-term resolution of the conflict. This is a troubling fact of Sri Lankan politics, but it also appears to reflect a large segment of Sinhala and Tamil popular opinion.

Prospects and Challenges

Sinhala and Tamil nationalists—embodied in the GOSL and the LTTE—have conceded little space for the Muslims to become an equal third party to the negotiations, and there appears to be little likelihood this pattern will change. For the foreseeable future, the Muslims will continue to be viewed as secondary players, both from the perspective of a violent and distrustful Tamil ethnonationalist movement and from the standpoint of a Sinhala nationalist state eager to enlist the Muslims as their allies, proxies, and stooges.

*Muslims will continue
to be viewed as
secondary players*

In the long run, however, the mobilization of an exclusive Sri Lankan Muslim political voice or the articulation of a monolithic set of Muslim goals and aspirations for the entire nation are unlikely to be successful or even desired. Regional and demographic differences among the Muslims will ultimately prove too strong to ignore, in which case a multipolar Muslim political universe could emerge. It is clear, for example, that older forms of metropolitan Sinhala coalition politics continue to exert a strong pull on Muslim politicians and voters in the urban southwest, while practitioners of a newer type of regional Tamil-speaking Muslim nationalism may ultimately be able to strike a bargain with the Tamils and Sinhalas in the northeast, where Muslims are most under threat and where Sri Lanka's

“Muslim issue” is geographically located. This is not to deny that Muslims in the southwest have immediate and pressing community concerns such as education and representation in the police, some of which are overarching issues for Muslims throughout Sri Lanka. However, a single Muslim party such as the SLMC may not prove capable of containing and focusing all of these competing Muslim pressures. If the coercive Tamil militants—the LTTE and the Karuna Group—are eventually weakened or neutralized, a pathway might reopen for Tamil-Muslim parliamentary collaboration to rebuild and develop the northeast region as a whole. If so, a workable system of Muslim political devolution could be devised to safeguard the Muslim-majority settlement areas within that region, and this might be achieved through a coalition of Muslim representatives from a number of different parties as well as members of other ethnic communities. In order for such multiethnic political devolution to occur, it is vital for Muslim political and civil society leadership to focus on specific issues from a broader minority perspective, not just a Muslim perspective, and to forge alliances with other minority communities in order to ensure that these issues are addressed.

Tamil nationalists, in turn, have not done enough to build the trust and confidence of the Muslim community, although strategically it is in their long-term interest to do so. The Muslims hold the key to any secure and prosperous peace settlement in the Tamil-speaking northeast of the island. This is especially true in the multiethnic Eastern Province, where large numbers of Muslims have lived side-by-side with their Tamil neighbors for centuries, and where a recognition of their shared interests and cultural traditions might be capable of overcoming their mutual suspicions. New political spaces have recently opened up where practical dimensions of the Muslim issue can be raised and debated at the regional level, including an increasingly proactive Muslim civil society sector that can play a key role in the dynamics of peacemaking, human rights, and humanitarian activities. Ultimately, the long-term interests of Muslims in the northeast will demand a regionally tailored solution, a “North-Eastern consensus” (Nesiah 2007) that satisfies the local needs of all the ethnic communities in that region. Dealing with these issues from a perspective of grassroots compromise and ethnic pluralism will be essential in order to ensure long-term peace and stability.

Muslim [leaders must address]...issues from a broader minority perspective

To enable such possibilities, two key steps must occur:

1. The Muslims in the north and east must articulate more clearly their essential needs and aspirations as an ethnic community, acknowledging the historical, economic, and cultural interests of their Tamil and Sinhala neighbors and expressing their commitment to a *shared* future in the northeastern region. A form of “third party” diplomacy on the part of the Muslim leadership might be able to bring all sides, including even the Upcountry (Estate) Tamils, together in search of a common solution.
2. Both the Tamil nationalists and the Sri Lankan government must provide concrete support and encouragement for a workable compromise in the northeast that honors the Muslims as a distinct ethnic community who are acknowledged to be equal stakeholders in a *regional* solution to the conflict.

In the final analysis, such a development would represent a triumph of pragmatism and local knowledge over rigid ethnonationalist dogmas and mutual distrust. In this way, the Muslims of Sri Lanka could serve the common good by fostering a model of local accommodation that brings peace to the entire island.

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Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia

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Rationale

Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia is part of a larger East-West Center project on state building and governance in Asia that investigates political legitimacy of governments, the relationship of the military to the state, the development of political and civil societies and their roles in democratic development, the role of military force in state formation, and the dynamics and management of internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes. An earlier project investigating internal conflicts arising from nation- and state-building processes focused on conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in China (Tibet and Xinjiang), Indonesia (Aceh and Papua), and southern Philippines (the Moro Muslims). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, that highly successful project was completed in March 2005. The present project, which began in July 2005, investigates the causes and consequences of internal conflicts arising from state- and nation-building processes in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, Nepal, northeast India, and Sri Lanka, and explores strategies and solutions for their peaceful management and eventual settlement.

Internal conflicts have been a prominent feature of the Asian political landscape since 1945. Asia has witnessed numerous civil wars, armed insurgencies, coups d'état, regional rebellions, and revolutions. Many have been protracted; several have far-reaching domestic and international consequences. The civil war in Pakistan led to the break up of that country in 1971; separatist struggles challenge the political and territorial integrity of China, India, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines, Thailand, and Sri Lanka; political uprisings in Thailand (1973 and 1991), the Philippines (1986), South Korea (1986), Taiwan (1991) Bangladesh (1991), and Indonesia (1998) resulted in dramatic political change in those countries. Although the political uprisings in Burma (1988) and China (1989) were suppressed, the political systems in those countries, as well as in Vietnam, continue to confront problems of legitimacy that could become acute; and

radical Islam poses serious challenges to stability in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Thai military ousted the democratically-elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. In all, millions of people have been killed in the internal conflicts, and tens of millions have been displaced. Moreover, the involvement of external powers in a competitive manner (especially during the Cold War) in several of these conflicts had negative consequences for domestic and regional security.

Internal conflicts in Asia can be traced to contestations over political legitimacy (the title to rule), national identity, state building, and distributive justice—that are often interconnected. With the bankruptcy of the socialist model and transitions to democracy in several countries, the number of internal conflicts over political legitimacy has declined in Asia. However, the legitimacy of certain governments continues to be contested from time to time, and the remaining communist and authoritarian systems are likely to confront challenges to their legitimacy in due course. Internal conflicts also arise from the process of constructing modern nation-states, and the unequal distribution of material and status benefits. Although many Asian states have made considerable progress in constructing national communities and viable states, several countries, including some major ones, still confront serious problems that have degenerated into violent conflict. By affecting the political and territorial integrity of the state as well as the physical, cultural, economic, and political security of individuals and groups, these conflicts have great potential to affect domestic and international stability.

Purpose

Internal Conflicts and State-Building Challenges in Asia examines internal conflicts arising from the political consciousness of minority communities in Burma/Myanmar, southern Thailand, northeast India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Except for Nepal, these states are not in danger of collapse. However, they do face serious challenges at the regional and local levels which, if not addressed, can negatively affect the vitality of the national state in these countries. Specifically, the project has a threefold purpose: (1) to develop an in-depth understanding of the domestic, transnational, and international dynamics of internal conflicts in these countries in the context of nation- and state-building strategies; (2) to examine how such conflicts have affected the vitality of the state; and (3) to explore strategies and solutions for the peaceful management and eventual settlement of these conflicts.

Design

A study group has been organized for each of the five conflicts investigated in the study. With a principal researcher for each, the study groups comprise practitioners and scholars from the respective Asian countries, including the region or province that is the focus of the conflict, as well as from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and the United States. The participants list that follows shows the composition of the study groups.

All five study groups met jointly for the first time in Washington, D.C., on October 30–November 3, 2005. Over a period of five days, participants engaged in intensive discussion of a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts investigated in the project. In addition to identifying key issues for research and publication, the meeting facilitated the development of cross-country perspectives and interaction among scholars who had not previously worked together. Based on discussion at the meeting, twenty-five policy papers were commissioned.

The study groups met separately in the summer of 2006 for the second set of meetings, which were organized in collaboration with respected policy-oriented think tanks in each host country. The Burma and southern Thailand study group meetings were held in Bangkok, July 10–11 and July 12–13, respectively. These meetings were cosponsored by The Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The Nepal study group was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, July 17–19, and was cosponsored by the Social Science Baha. The northeast India study group met in New Delhi, India, August 9–10. This meeting was cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Research. The Sri Lanka meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 14–16, and cosponsored by the Centre for Policy Alternatives. In each of these meetings, scholars and practitioners reviewed and critiqued papers produced for the meetings and made suggestions for revision.

Publications

This project will result in twenty to twenty-five policy papers providing a detailed examination of particular aspects of each conflict. Subject to satisfactory peer review, these 18,000- to 24,000-word essays will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Policy Studies* series, and will be circulated widely to key personnel and institutions in the policy and intellectual communities and the media in the respective Asian countries, the United States, and other relevant countries. Some studies will be published in the East-West Center Washington *Working Papers* series.

Public Forums

To engage the informed public and to disseminate the findings of the project to a wide audience, public forums have been organized in conjunction with study group meetings.

Five public forums were organized in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with the first study group meeting. The first forum, cosponsored by The Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, discussed the conflict in southern Thailand. The second, cosponsored by The Sigur Center for Asian Studies of The George Washington University, discussed the conflict in Burma. The conflicts in Nepal were the focus of the third forum, which was cosponsored by the Asia Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The fourth public meeting, cosponsored by the Foreign Policy Studies program at The Brookings Institution, discussed the conflicts in northeast India. The fifth forum, cosponsored by the South Asia Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, focused on the conflict in Sri Lanka.

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Background of Sri Lanka's Conflicts

Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, after almost 450 years of colonial rule under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. This history—and the country's proximity to India—helped produce a polyethnic, multireligious population consisting of Buddhists (69%), Hindus (15%), Muslims (8%), and Christians (8%). Britain's colonial policies and practices helped create fissures, especially between the majority Sinhala and the minority Tamils. Post-independence Sinhalese elites made use of this division both to pursue anti-Tamil policies that benefited their community and to build a Sinhalese Buddhist nation-state that marginalized minorities. Tamil elites, in the main, initially demanded a federal solution whereby the predominantly Tamil northeast, considered part of the Tamil homeland, could enjoy autonomy from the Sinhalese-dominated south. When such demands were disregarded, the moderate Tamil elites lost out to extremist youth, who by the early 1970s began clamoring for a separate state.

The state's discriminatory policies led to anti-Tamil riots in 1956, followed by deadlier riots in 1958, 1978, 1981, and 1983. The 1983 riot was especially gruesome and caused thousands of Tamils to flee to India and Western countries as refugees, producing a vibrant Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. This diaspora plays a major role in financing the Tamil separatist struggle now waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). By eliminating other Tamil guerrilla organizations, the LTTE claims to be the Tamils' sole representative. The LTTE's practices of forcibly recruiting child soldiers and resorting to suicide bombings have caused a number of states and political entities—including India, the United States, Canada, Australia, and the European Union—to proscribe it as a terrorist organization.

The civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has killed more than 70,000 people. Most agree that a political solution to the conflict is necessary, yet the two main protagonists have cast aside four attempts to reach a peace agreement. The most recent peace process began in February 2002, when the United National Front coalition government, headed by Ranil Wickremesinghe, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the LTTE. War was avoided until June 2006, when the LTTE's intransigence and the newly elected government's uncompromising policies led to renewed conflict. Overall, the peace processes have failed mainly due to the conflicting parties' unwillingness to reconcile the LTTE's

maximalist demands and various Sri Lankan governments' minimalist responses. Intransigent positions have also made it impossible to collaborate constructively in the wake of the devastating December 2004 tsunami.

Many argue that the LTTE has never jettisoned the quest to create a separate state and has simply used the peace processes to rearm and regroup. The LTTE says that it could agree to a federal arrangement, yet its proposals for conflict resolution are more confederal than federal in nature. It is also clear that successive Sri Lankan governments have been unable to craft a political arrangement that would allow the island's Tamils to live with dignity and self-respect. Most Sinhalese oppose federalism. They fear it would eventually lead to the country's dismemberment. In addition, radical Sinhalese and Buddhist nationalists insist that Sri Lanka be maintained as a unitary state. These radicals have adopted hostile attitudes and policies toward parliamentarians, civil society activists, diplomats, clergy, and NGOs advocating devolution or federalism as a solution to the civil war.

The LTTE, which controls large areas of territory in the Northern and Eastern provinces, suffered a split in March 2004 when its eastern commander broke away and began collaborating with elements in the military. This has weakened the LTTE, and the group has since lost strategic territory in the Eastern Province. The large Muslim population in the Eastern Province also undermines the LTTE's goal of creating a separate state for the island's Tamils. The Muslim dimension introduces a new element, further complicating the peace process and a future settlement.

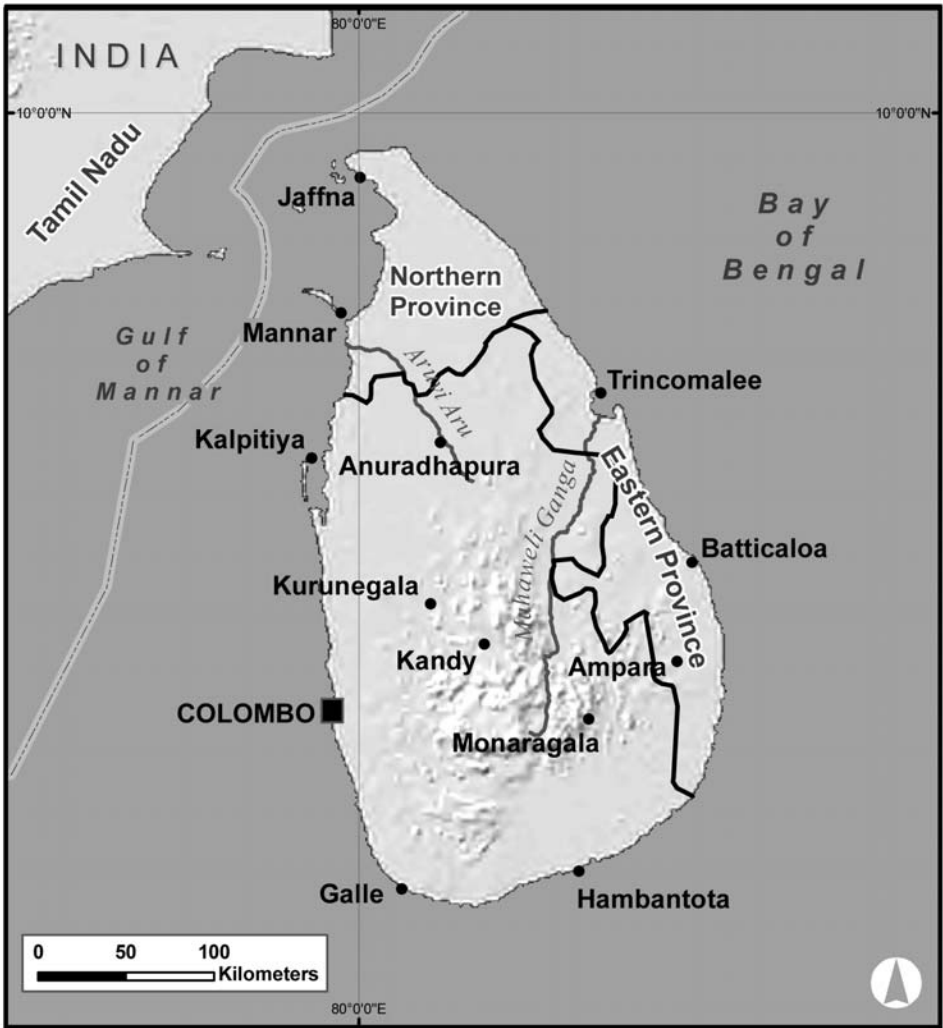
In November 2005, Mahinda Rajapakse was elected president with the support of Sinhalese nationalists who demand a military solution to the ethnic conflict. Although Rajapakse has yet to follow through on all the pro-nationalist promises he made in his election manifesto, his administration and the military have been emboldened by the recent war gains in the Eastern Province. The Rajapakse government has consequently adopted a military strategy of massive retaliation against the LTTE at the expense of a political strategy that promotes conflict resolution. This has contributed to gross human rights abuses and increased the misery of the Tamils, especially those living in LTTE-controlled areas.

The LTTE's rise has also complicated India-Sri Lanka relations. India supported the Tamil struggle in the early 1980s, when Sri Lanka disregarded India's regional preferences and sought to draw close to the United States and other Western interests. This led to the Indo-Lanka Peace

Accord of 1987 and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) stationed in the northeast. For various reasons, the IPKF and LTTE ended up fighting each other in what became India's longest war. India proscribed the LTTE in 1992 because the group had assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi the previous year. But having done so, India is now unable to play a direct role in conflict resolution. Complicating matters further for India are Tamil Nadu's more than 60 million Tamils, who sympathize with their beleaguered cousins across the Palk Strait.

Sri Lanka has paid a massive price for civil war. At the time of independence, Sri Lanka's high literacy rate, experience with universal franchise, and relatively high socio-economic indices led many to predict that it was the most likely of the newly independent states to become a peaceful, liberal democracy. Ethnically divisive policies and subsequent civil war have undermined that promise, although this island the size of West Virginia still has vast potential, provided peace can be achieved between its two principal ethnic communities.

Map of Sri Lanka



- Capital Cities
- Cities and Towns
- ⚡ Provincial Boundaries
- ⚡ Exclusive Economic Zone

Note: Map boundaries and locations are approximate. Geographic features and their names do not imply official endorsement or recognition by the UN.

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About this Issue

The Sri Lankan ethnic conflict is often regarded as a two-way contest between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority, ignoring the interests and concerns of the island's 8 percent Muslim (or "Moorish") minority. One-third of Sri Lanka's Muslims are concentrated in towns and districts located within the Tamil-speaking agricultural northeast, a region envisioned as an independent "Tamil Eelam" by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In the postindependence period, the Muslim leadership at the national level abandoned their colonial identity as Arabs ("Moors") and adopted a religious identity as Muslims, clearly defining their ethnicity as neither Sinhala nor Tamil. Muslim politicians emphasized coalition politics with mainstream Sinhala parties until the outbreak of the armed Tamil secessionist campaign in the 1980s. Since then, Muslim communities in the northeast have suffered violence and dispossession at the hands of the LTTE, and they have been harmed by indiscriminate military campaigns conducted by the Sri Lankan armed forces. A Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, was formed in the 1980s to defend the security of the northeastern Muslims, and it has sought to secure an equal role for the Muslims in peace negotiations following the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002. A narrow Sinhala vs. Tamil mindset, and a complex set of sociological and political factors within the Muslim community, have limited the direct participation of the Muslims in the peace process. However, because of the large Muslim population in the multiethnic northeast, Muslims must be actively involved in any long-term settlement of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

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