

Amidst a severe economic crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka also appears to be experiencing ethno-religious animosity. International ratings agencies have warned that Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government could be on the brink of default. During the recent visit of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, cash strapped Colombo sought to reschedule its huge Chinese debt burden. As its tourism dependent economy suffers the effects of pandemic waves, the Sri Lankan government has implemented food rationing at supermarkets and shortages of essential goods. Never before has Sri Lanka been in a situation where a sovereign default is imminent despite mounting foreign debt over the years. In November 2021, Sri Lanka's external reserves dropped to \$1.6 billion. This sort of drastic economic downturn is deviant for Sri Lanka's standards. But domestically as inflation rises to record levels, the President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is going ahead with the conception of "One Country, One Law" acting upon his 2019 election slogan, in which he won with an overwhelming support from the country's Buddhist majority.

The Rajapaksa government has appointed a [13-member task force for the establishment of the 'One Country, One Law'](#) concept in the island nation and to prepare a draft act according to the gazette released on October 27, 2021. The final report is to be submitted by February 28, 2022 after monthly reports to President Rajapaksa on its progress. The 'One Country, One Law' concept was promoted by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) to win the support of the Sinhala majority as a counter to the rising Islamic extremism. The constitution of the task force has created much agitation within Sri Lankan polity. It is headed by a Buddhist monk, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara with a extremist reputation, is a former convict and infamous for his anti-Muslim stance. Further the task force has four Muslim scholars as members but no representation has been allowed for the minority Tamils. Galagodaaththe Gnanasaran founded the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) after breaking away from the right-wing nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya organisation. It practises extreme nationalist ideologies, even criticizing non-extremist Buddhist monks for not taking action against the rise of Islam or other Western religions within Sri Lanka.

BBS mobilised activism against everyday Muslims practices and around what they described as the threat posed by the "social separatism" of "extremist Muslims". After the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, carried out by the Islamic extremist group National Thawheed Jamaat (NTJ) affiliated to the ISIS, overall anti-Muslim hatred escalated in Sri Lanka and extremist groups like BBS rode that wave. Almost 300 people were killed when churches and luxury hotels were targeted by Islamic terrorist suicide bombers. Taking cue from the social media angst in the aftermath of the attack, government policy discussion began the systematic targeting of the country's Muslim population.



Image source: CNBC

Leading political parties whipped up anti-Muslim communalism. Yet it failed at taking any firm action against the associates and relatives of the suicide bombers, who were involved in planning and masterminding the terrorist attacks. The government has been under angry criticism from the families of the victims and the Christian church in Sri Lanka, for taking over two years to start the trial procedure. People have accused the Rajapaksa government of failing to take proper action against those responsible. In November the trial of the 25 men accused of masterminding the 2019 Easter bombings was initiated.

In a deliberate policy to win the support of the Sinhala majority as a counter to rising Islamic extremism, the government has given tacit support to extremist Buddhist monks. In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, a parliamentary sectoral oversight committee made recommendations in 14 areas, for terrorism prevention measures many of which curb the religious rights of the Muslim minority. A series of targeted legislations included a ban on the 'niqab' and the burial rites of Muslims. Sarath Weerasekara, Sri Lanka's minister of public security, was quoted as saying that "the burqa" was a "sign of religious extremism" and has a "direct impact on national security". After several statements by human rights organisations and the UN these moves have since been rescinded, but they are indicative of a tendency towards marginalisation of the minorities and centralised government, anchored

in Sinhala majoritarianism.

The appointment of the Presidential task force comes months after a Cabinet decision to amend the country's Muslim personal laws. Writing in the International Crisis Group (ICG), senior consultant Alan Keenan feels that Sri Lanka's "One Country, One Law" Presidential Task Force is a means by which the Rajapaksa can ["divert discontent among the government's Sinhala Buddhist base toward an embattled minority"](#).

These attempts to divide the polity are diversionary tactics that the Rajapaksa government has decided to pursue. There was evidence of the failure to pursue available intelligence by the security establishment. Several senior officials stand accused of criminal negligence for failing to act on intelligence information that could have prevented the bombings. Further members of the Catholic community have alleged harassed for demanding justice in the 2019 bombings case.



Image source: Getty

More than [500,000 Sri Lankans have fallen below the poverty line since the beginning of the](#)

[pandemic](#). The economic hardships that the nation is facing is in large measure because it owes China more than USD 5 billion in debt and an additional USD 1 in 2021. It borrowed heavily from China for infrastructure, most of which ended up as white elephants. Unable to repay a \$1.4bn loan for the Hambantota port, located along vital east-west international shipping routes, Sri Lanka was forced to lease the facility to a Chinese company for 99 years in 2017. Former central bank deputy governor, WA Wijewardena has warned that the struggles of ordinary people would exacerbate the financial crisis. Meanwhile, Tamils from the north and east, hill country (Malaiyaha Tamils) and Tamil-speaking Muslims continue to seek the full implementation of the 13th Amendment, which led to the creation of Provincial Councils, assuring a power sharing arrangement to enable all nine provinces in the country, including Sinhala majority areas, to self-govern. Despite repeated assurances by Colombo of its intentions to ensure meaningful devolution, the provincial administrations remain defunct.

According to a report titled [‘From Burning Houses to Burning Bodies: Anti-Muslim Harassment, Discrimination and Violence in Sri Lanka,’](#) by human rights group Amnesty International states that anti-Muslim sentiment had been weaponized by the current government and used to garner support from the majority Sinhala Buddhist population. “The consistent marginalization, harassment, discrimination and violence against the Muslim community in Sri Lanka are perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, acting with impunity and the implicit approval of the state.” It warns against the misuse of domestic legislation to arbitrarily target Muslims.

Populist sentiments are being effectively exploited by the governments and in the process exacerbating the ethno-religious fault lines in which the Sinhala Buddhist expressions are repeatedly asserted over both ethnic and religious minorities such as Tamils and Muslims. The manipulations for political power, with heavy influence of political Buddhism, have led to a situation in which moderation and reason which were the hallmarks of a Sri Lankan have clearly taken a backseat. Apart from the image of Sri Lanka as a modern sensible nation the pluralism of the island nation will also be dented.

*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Kootneeti Team*

Facebook Comments