

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author in grateful acknowledgement thank the All Ceylon Union of Muslim League Youth Fronts – ACUMLYF for the Survey Report on the Status of Colombo Muslim Schools and the World Assembly of Muslim Youths – WAMY, Sri Lanka, for the Research Document based on Abnormal Behaviours of Muslim Youths in Colombo which were very useful for the preparation of this document.

The author would also like to thank Mr. M.D.M. Vazeer, Mr. Ashroff Hussain, Mr. M.A.M. Anver, Mr. Hilmy Ahamed for the encouragements they gave and Mr. Latheef Farook for the fitting forward for this document.

M.I.M. Mohideen

Author

FOREWORD

As rightly pointed out by former Chief Justice Sarath N Silva the Muslim community, in keeping with their religious teachings and traditions, has been the most peaceful community in the island. They never took to violence to highlight their grievances despite the immense sufferings they underwent both in the hands of Tamil militants and the discriminatory policies of successive governments.

For example they were ethnic cleansed from the entire North. Even today these unfortunate victims of LTTE barbarity suffer in refugee camps in appalling conditions. In the East they were indiscriminately killed, their agricultural and other lands grabbed, subjected to extortion and even deprived of their livelihood. Yet their miserable plight failed to attract the attention of the power that be.

This is in spite of the fact that throughout their more than one thousand year history, they remained loyal to the country, lived in harmony and supported the majority community both in times of prosperity and adversity to an extent that they placed the country's interest above that of their own.

For example, in the aftermath of the World War II, when the British colonial power insisted that three quarters of the population should approve demand for independence, Muslims supported the move despite disadvantages to the community in the Sri Lanka Bill. Expressing his gratitude on behalf of the Sinhala community S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike assured that his community would always remember this and attend to any reasonable request of the community.

This has been the community's policy even after the independence in spite of discrimination. To cite yet another example; what is conveniently forgotten is the crucial role played by the Muslims in preserving the territorial integrity of the island. During the early days of Tamil militancy India which trained, armed and financed Tamil militants stood behind the Tamil militants' call for a separate state. It was the time when the island's armed forces were not equipped or trained, as they are today, to deal with the separatist threat.

However Muslims throughout the country vehemently opposed calls for the division of the country and firmly stood for territorial integrity and unity only to face death, devastation, loss of properties, livelihood and displacement. Had

the Muslims joined the Tamil militants then, the island's fate would have been sealed and history would have been different today.

Despite all these sacrifices and sufferings Muslims remain the most misunderstood community in the island as, contrary to common belief that Muslims float in wealth, they suffer from extreme poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, educational, housing and several other problems. The situation is worse in Colombo where poverty, illiteracy and severe unemployment even driven some to take to underworld and drug trafficking for survival.

All these problems were highlighted well by M.I.M. Mohideen, a well known researcher on Muslim affairs and conscious keeper of the community whose tireless work help document burning issues faced by Muslims. His latest document on Muslims in Colombo provides a rare glimpse into the community's plight stressing the need to address them to ensure they improve their condition to play their role for the overall development of the country in this changed political environment in the aftermath of the military defeat of the Tamil militants.

In this document he explains how in this multiracial, multi-cast, multi-religious, multilingual country, the Muslim community finds itself quite marginalized without effective representation to highlight its grievances in the Parliament. Like the other communities, the Muslims too want to have their grievances aired in the appropriate forum and have them redressed.

As he pointed out political powers by virtue of numbers have always been in the hands of the majority community – Sinhalese. This had led to serious discrimination of the minorities, Tamils and Muslims, by successive governments of the so called National political parties - UNP and SLFP, since independence. It is the failure of the Sinhalese majority to recognize and respond to the legitimate needs and aspirations of the minorities have led to dissatisfaction, terrorism and demand for separation.

Under the circumstances this document, an eye opener and a clear message to all those who are keen to learn lessons from the past and work towards unity and communal harmony to jointly take the country forward to the benefit of all.

Latheef Farook

INTRODUCTION

Muslim Patriotism and Loyalty

Soon after defeating the LTTE Terrorism in May 2009, the President Mahinda Rajapaksa has said that there is no minority or majority communities and only the Patriots and Traitors today in Sri Lanka. Muslim Ministers and Political Leaders supporting his UPFA Government have also said that there is no need for communal political parties and wanted the Muslims to join the National political parties.

Under these circumstances it has become very pertinent to have a closer look at the plight of the Muslims particularly in Colombo for being patriots and loyal members of the National political parties in Sri Lanka.

We, Muslims are proud of the fact that we are citizens of Sri Lanka, our mother land, where our racial ancestors, the Arabs originated the Sri Lanka Muslim race, more than Two Thousand Five Hundred (2,500) years ago. As people professing the religion of Islam, we have been here for more than 1,430 years.

The Malabars – Tamils, were all powerful in most of the commercial ports of the Island at the time when our ancestors were settling here. The Arabs learnt the language of the Tamils with whom they had business relationships for many centuries. Although Sri Lanka Muslims speak the Tamil Language, we are not ethnically Tamils. In Sri Lanka the Sinhalese call us “Yonaka” and the Tamils call us “Sonakar.” “Yon” and “Sonakam” means “Arabia” in Pali and Tamil languages respectively. We are the descendants of the people from Arabia – Arabs.

Muslims have always been loyal to the country and were in the forefront of the struggle – resisting foreign invaders, winning back the lost freedom and consolidating the freedom won. Muslims have fought together with the Sinhalese when the Portuguese invaded Sri Lanka. Every resistant moment of the Sinhalese had Muslims in their ranks. So much so that we became the target of persecution under the colonial powers. Muslims did not become traitors to receive honours or land. For a period of roughly three centuries, between the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 and the departure of the Dutch in 1795, the Muslims in the maritime provinces underwent untold hardships at the hands of the invaders for being patriots.

In the last fifty or sixty years, during which Sri Lanka mounted a Constitutional struggle, you will not come across one solitary Muslim voice against the aspirations of the majority Sinhalese people. Muslim representatives did not go before Royal Commissions, nor have they gone before the International Community with accusation and sought to blacken the image of the majority community – the Sinhalese people.

Sri Lanka Muslim Community of today is composed of various cultural groups. The vast majority of them are Sri Lanka Moors – descendants of the Arabs. The Malays who came during the Dutch period after 1640 from Indonesia and Melaya from the second largest group. Latter during the British period, after 1796 more Muslim Traders came from Indian sub-continent, mostly from Malabar and Coromandel coasts. More recently came the Memons, Bohras and others from India, who have made their homes here and became a part of Sri Lanka Muslim Community.