

**POLITICAL SURVIVAL THROUGH STRATEGIC
RECONCILIATION: THE CASE OF MUSLIM
MINORITY IN SRI LANKA**

BY

MOHAMED FOUZ MOHAMED ZACKY

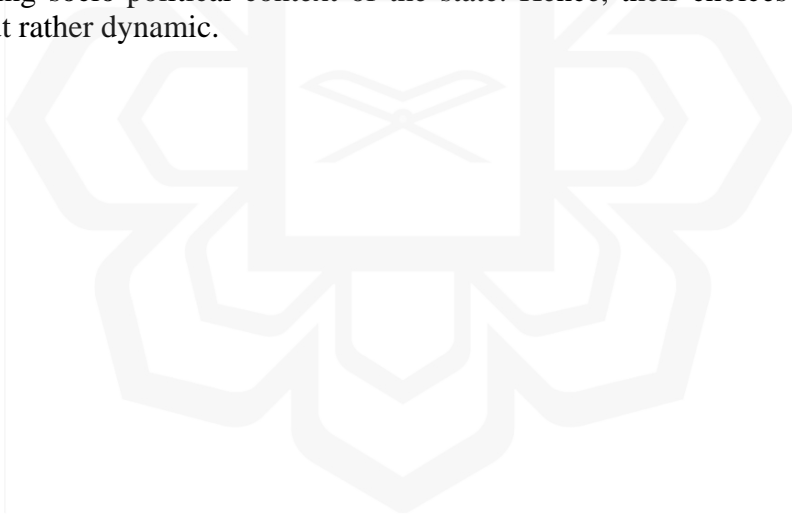
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ABSTRACT

This research examines how the mainstream Sri Lankan Muslim civil society organizations have responded to the Sinhala Buddhist ideological paradigm in post-war Sri Lanka. The ideology perceives that the Sinhala Buddhists are actual citizens of Sri Lanka and the minorities are 'others' or 'guests.' Hence, the ideology plays a structural role in generating anti-Muslim sentiments in post-war Sri Lanka. Based on the primary and secondary data and the thematic qualitative analysis, this research builds an argument, through analysing discourses and activities of the selected mainstream Muslim organizations, that minorities pick strategies for their struggle against majoritarian state and ideology, taking their political and other demographical realities into account. So, contrary to prevailing wisdom that argues that minorities attempt to deconstruct the majoritarian ideological foundation in their struggle for equality, dominant and mainstream Muslim civil society organizations in Sri Lanka have chosen to reconcile with it while resisting only its practical implications upon the community. Even though this strategy brings self-contradictory elements into play on theoretical grounds, the Muslim civil society organizations think that it is a practically reasonable strategy given the developing socio-political context of the state. Hence, their choices are not static but rather dynamic.



خلاصة البحث

يبحث هذا البحث في كيفية استجابة منظمات المجتمع المدني الإسلامية السريلانكية السائدة للنموذج الأيديولوجي البوذي السنهالي في سريلانكا بعد الحرب. ترى الأيديولوجية أن البوذيين السنهاليين هم مواطنون حقيقيون لسريلانكا والأقليات هم "آخرون" أو "ضيوف"، وبالتالي، تلعب الأيديولوجية دورًا هيكليًا في توليد مشاعر معادية للمسلمين في سريلانكا ما بعد الحرب. استنادًا إلى البيانات الأولية والثانوية والتحليل النوعي الموضوعي، يبني هذا البحث حجة، من خلال تحليل خطابات وأنشطة المنظمات الإسلامية الرئيسية المختارة، بأن الأقليات تختار استراتيجيات لنضالها ضد الدولة والأيديولوجية ذات الأغلبية التي تأخذ حقائقها السياسية والديموغرافية الأخرى في الحساب. لذلك، على عكس الحكمة السائدة التي تجادل بأن الأقليات تحاول تفكيك الأساس الأيديولوجي للأغلبية في نضالهم من أجل المساواة، اختارت منظمات المجتمع المدني الإسلامية المهيمنة والسائدة في سريلانكا التصالح معها بينما تقاوم آثارها العملية فقط على المجتمع. على الرغم من أن هذه الاستراتيجية تجلب عناصر متناقضة مع الذات إلى اللعب على أسس نظرية، تعتقد منظمات المجتمع المدني الإسلامية أنها استراتيجية معقولة عمليًا نظرًا للسياق الاجتماعي والسياسي المتطور للدولة. ومن ثم، فإن خياراتهم ليست ثابتة بل ديناميكية.

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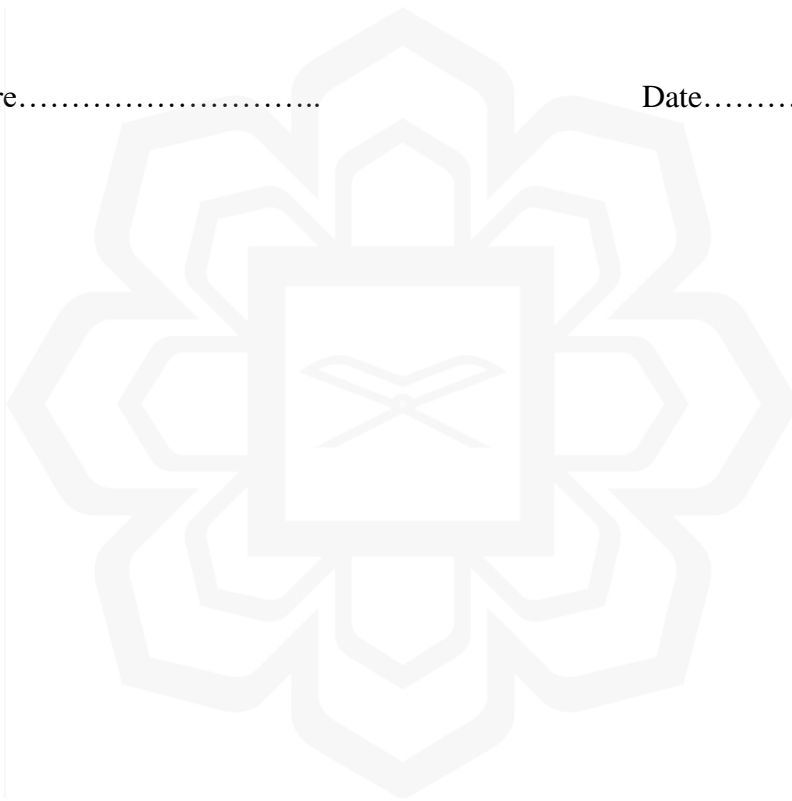
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions

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*I dedicate this thesis to my beloved parents and my wife
for their continuous support, inspiration, and love
till the very end of this journey*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Approval Page	iv
Declaration	v
Copyright page	vi
Acknowledgments	viii
Table of Contents	ix
Lists of Tables	xiv
List of Figures	xv
List of Abbreviations	xvi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.2 Problem Statement	4
1.3 Research Questions	6
1.4 Research Objectives	6
1.5 Justification of Research	7
1.6 Literature Review	8
1.7 Theoretical Framework	17
1.8 Main Arguments of Research	24
1.9 Research Methodology	24
1.9.1 Research Approach	24
1.9.2 Data Sources and Methods	24
1.9.3 The Process of Data Collection	25
1.10 A Note on Selected Organizations	28
1.11 Proposed Chapters	29
CHAPTER TWO: ANTI-MUSLIM VIOLENCE IN THE POST-WAR SRI LANKA: THE BACKGROUND AND DYNAMICS	31
2.1 Muslims of Sri Lanka: Culture, Identity Making and Post War Developments	31
2.2 The Phase of Islamophobic Narratives	38
2.2.1 Hate Campaign and Anti-Muslim Sentiments	38
2.2.2 Being Racist Is Not A Crime	39
2.2.3 Halal Industry and Buddhist Culture	40
2.2.4 Anti-Animal Slaughtering Movement	40
2.2.5 Against 'Creeping Shariah'	41
2.2.6 Violent Muslim World vs. Non-Violent Buddhist World	42
2.2.7 Monopolizing Markets	43
2.3 The Phase Minor Physical Attacks	44
2.3.1 Religious Places: Destruction, Disruption and Restriction	44
2.3.2 Destruction	46
2.3.3 Disruption	46
2.3.4 Restriction	47
2.3.5 Property Destruction	48
2.3.6 Discriminatory Measures	51
2.3.7 The Spectrum of Perpetrators	52

2.4 The Phase of Massive Riots	54
2.4.1 A Preliminary Observation	54
2.4.2 Aluthgama Riots	54
2.4.3 Gintota Riots	56
2.4.4 Ampara and Kandy Riots	57
2.4.5 Post-Easter Sunday Riots	59
2.5 Anti-Muslim Violence : The Constituent Elements of Root Causes	60
2.5.1 Sinhala Buddhist Ideology and its Continuity	60
2.5.2 The Concept of Sacred Geography	62
2.5.3 Role of History in Justifying the Ethnic Violence against Minorities.....	63
2.5.4 The Idea of Automatic Privileges	64
2.5.5 Sinhala Buddhist Ideology, Host-Guest Theory, and the Violence.....	65
2.5.6 Globalization and its Impact on Sinhala Buddhist Ideology.....	65
2.5 Conclusion	67

CHAPTER THREE: MAPPING THE COMMUNITY ACTIVISM: AN INTRODUCTION TO MUSLIM COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN SRI LANKA

3.1 Introduction.....	69
3.2 All Ceylon Jammityatul Ulama (ACJU)	70
3.2.1 The Background and Emerging Context.....	70
3.2.2 Objectives and Strategies	71
3.2.3. Administrative Hierarchy.....	74
3.3 National Shoora Council (NSC)	75
3.3.2 The Background and Emerging Context.....	75
3.3.3. The Administrative Structure	77
3.3.4 Objectives and Strategies	79
3.4 Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (MCSL).....	81
3.4.1 Emerging Context	81
3.4.2 Policies and the Nature of the Organization	82
3.4.3 The Conflict Over the Consensus: MCSL, ACJU and NSC in the Post-war Context	84
3.5 Sri Lanka Jamath-E-Islami (SLJI).....	85
3.5.1 Emerging Context and the Recent Changes.....	85
3.5.2 Key Strategies and Policies.....	87
3.5.3 Administrative Hierarchy of SLJI.....	89
3.6 Salamah Society.....	91
3.6.1 Emerging Context	91
3.6.2 Objectives, Policies and Directive Principles	92
3.7 Sri Lanka Islamic Students Movements (SLISM).....	94
3.7.1 Emerging Context and Recent Trajectories	94
3.7.2 The Structure and the Organizational Design	97
3.7.3 The Strategies of SLISM.....	98
3.8 Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF).....	100
3.8.1 Emerging Context and Later Developments	100
3.8.2 Mission, Objectives and Strategies	101

3.8.3 The Organizational Structure and the Working Model.....	101
3.9 Organization of Muslim Students' Education and Development (OMSED)	102
3.9.1 The idea of the Organization and Objectives.....	102
3.9.2 The working aspects, strategies and general policies.....	103
3.9.3 Administrative Design	104
3.10 Conclusion	104

CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS AN UNEASY CO-EXISTENCE BETWEEN THE MAJORITARIAN IDEOLOGY AND MINORITY ASPIRATIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CITIZENSHIP AND RIGHTS DISCOURSES OF MUSLIM MINORITY IN SRI LANKA

4.1 Introduction.....	106
4.2 The State and Its Ideology: The Foundations of Muslim Minority Discourse	107
4.2.1 The State Ideology between Theory and Application: The Muslim Perspective	107
4.2.2 The Making of a Legitimate Case for the Issue of State Religion	110
4.2.3 Managing the Crisis Zone: From the Grand Narrative to a New Chemistry for Minority-Majority Relationship in a Majoritarian State	114
4.2.4 The Emergence of Internal Criticism and the Birth of a New Discourse: Prospects and Limitations.....	118
4.3 The State Ideology and The Daily Life of the Community: From Communal Violence to Cultural Sensibilities.....	121
4.3.1 Discussing the Root Causes of the Ethnic Violence	121
4.3.2 The Right to Participate in the National Issues and Equal Access to National Resources.....	132
4.3.3 The Muslim Activists on the Cultural Sensitivities: An Exceptionally Challenging Narrative	137
4.4 Strategizing the Struggle for Equality: The Muslim Community Activists and Their Way of Contestation.....	139
4.4.1 Reforming the Constitution.....	139
4.4.2 Intra-Community Debates on Social Change.....	142
4.4.3 Strategizing Social Engagement	144
4.4.4 Realistic Approach over Idealistic Narratives.....	145
4.5 Conclusion	148

CHAPTER FIVE: THE MUSLIMS OF SRI LANKA IN THE REALM OF POLITICAL AND LEGAL PARADIGM: AN EVALUATIVE READING ON PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

5.1 Introduction.....	150
Part 01: Political Domain	151
5.2 The Muslim Community Organizations and Its Policies in Dealing with Political Realm	151

5.2.1	The Context.....	151
5.2.2	The Policies and the General Strategy for Dealing with Politics...	152
5.2.3	Guiding the Community during Elections: A Critical Preview over Statements of the Muslim Organizations	155
5.3	The Question of Strategizing the Question of Strategizing the Demorcatc Right : A Crtical Analaysis of the Perspectives of Muslim Community Activists	158
5.3.1	The Background.....	158
5.3.2	Muslim Ethnic Parties: Potential Negative Implications for the Future.....	159
5.3.3	Muslim Ethnic Parties: Possible Positive Implications for the Future.....	163
5.3.4	The Developing Debate over the Possible Modality for an Effective Future Political Engagement.....	165
5.3.5	Concluding Remarks.....	168
5.4	The Muslim Community Organizations as Political Lobby Groups: The Strategies and Devices	169
5.4.1	A General Note	169
5.4.2	On Muslim Political Actors	170
5.4.3	On External Lobbying: The Strategy of Direct Dialogue	174
5.3.4	The Last Word about Strategizing the Muslim Activism in Political Realm	177
	Part 02 Legal Domain	178
5.4	The Muslims of Sri Lanka in Strategizing Legal Paradigm in the Post- War Context	178
5.4.1	Mapping the Post-War Legal Landscape of Sri Lanka	178
5.4.2	The Institutionalization of the Legal Struggle	183
5.4.3	Building Pressure	185
5.4.4	Finance and the Extreme Racism.....	187
5.4.5	The Community in the Legal Front: An Overall Preview.....	187
5.5	Conclusion.....	190

CHAPTER SIX: MUSLIM COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND THE STRATEGIC SOCIAL MANAGEMENT: POLICIES, PROJECTS, AND IMPACTS 193

6.1	Introduction.....	193
6.2	Muslim Organizations and the Question of Social Harmony: An Overview of Post-War Developments	194
6.2.1	Re-conceptualization of a ‘New Sri Lankan Muslim Community’	194
6.2.2	Projects in Operation: ACJU, NSC and SLJI.....	200
6.3	The Muslim Civil Society Organizations and Education Reform	208
6.3.1	The Sri Lankan Muslim Education: Problems and Challenges	208
6.3.2	Insight Institute of Management Studies	209
6.3.3	Uplift Education	212
6.3.4	OMSED Sri Lanka: Moral Education and Skills	214
6.3.5	Analysis.....	215
6.4	Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum and Its Projects.....	217

6.3.1 SLMMF and its Contribution to Development of Muslim Journalists	217
6.3.2 SLMMF and National and Community Issues	219
6.3.3 SLMMF and Strategic Collaborations	221
6.3.4 SLMMF's Contribution: An Analysis	222
6.5 Muslim Federation for Culture and Development.....	223
6.5.1 Vision and Mission	223
6.5.2 Projects and Activities.....	224
6.5.3 Analysis.....	226
6.6 Conclusion	227
CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYTICAL CONCLUSION	229
7.1 How do Muslim Community Organizations Influence the Muslim Minority Community?.....	231
7.2 Citizenship and Rights Discourses of Muslim Community.....	232
7.3 Political and Legal Strategy of Sri Lankan Muslims.....	234
7.5 The Muslim Community Organizations and the Strategic Social Management	236
7.6 Notes on Theoretical Implications.....	238
7.7 Policy Recommendations	240
BIBLIOGRAPHY	245
APPENDIX A	259
APPENDIX B	262

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Number of Damages	58
Table 2.2	Number of Damages	59



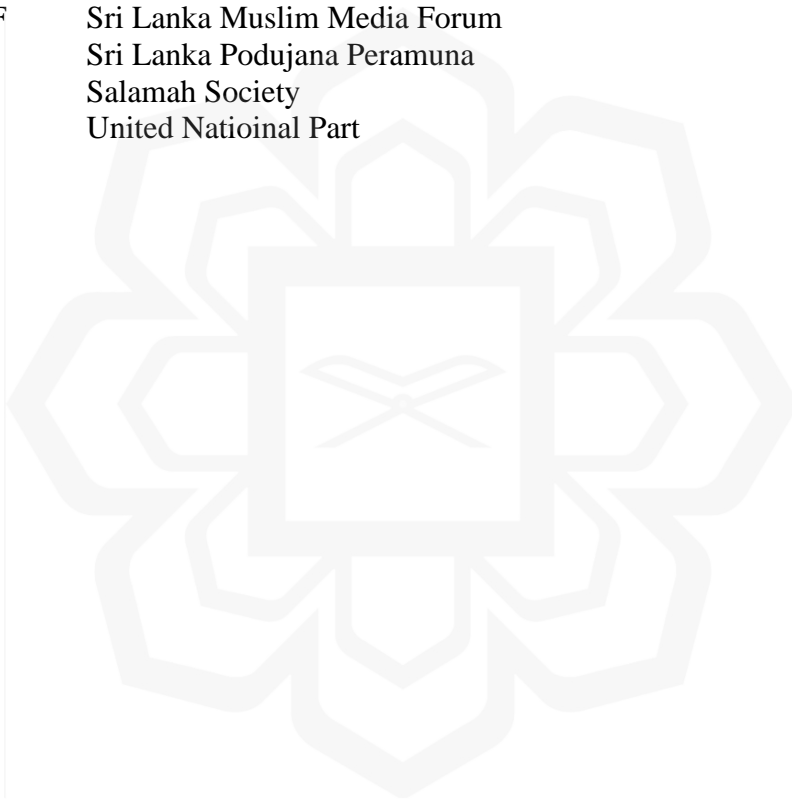
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Model of Anthony Smith	18
Figure 1.2 Model of Amal Jamal	21
Figure 1.3 Analytical Framework	23
Figure 2.1 The Geography of Anti-Muslim Attacks (2013)	48
Figure 2.2 The Typology of Anti-Muslim Attacks in Post-war Sri Lanka	50
Figure 2.3 The Perpetrators Involved in the Anti-Muslim Incidents	53



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACJU	All Ceylon Jammiyatul Ulama
JVP	Janatha Vimukthy Peramuna
KF	Kandy Forum
MCBO	Muslim Community Based Organaizations
MCSL	Muslim Council of Sri Lanka
MFCD	Muslim Foundation for Cultural Development
NSC	National Shooraa Council
OMSED	Organization of Muslim Students for Education and Development
SLJI	Sri Lanka Jamaathe Islami
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLMMF	Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum
SLPP	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna
SS	Salamah Society
UNP	United Natioinal Part



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Sri Lanka is a country where multi-culturalism, linguistic diversity, and religious pluralism are quite clearly visible like other South Asian countries. Buddhists are the majority of 74.9 % of the population while Ethnic Tamils, which are considered as the first ethnic minority, consist of 15.37 % of the total population. Muslims, who are considered as the second ethnic minority, consist of 9.7 %.¹ On the grounds of inter-ethnic relationships, Sri Lankan Muslims' relationships with other communities had been continuously fluctuating between peace and distrust throughout the last century.

However, once the Sri Lankan civil war started and took its brutal roots and toll in the North and East parts of the island in 1980s, peace building practitioners strongly advocated to change the structure of the state and governance to allow it to cope with growing demands of the communities. As a result, conflict management mechanisms were put forward by the international community that mostly included the demands of the majority Buddhists represented by the State and ethnic Northern Tamils represented by separatist armed group of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam. In this background, Sri Lankan Muslims were forced to assert a separate identity and their political aspirations in order to grab an attention argued that they also should be included in the discussions of Sri Lankan state restructuring process². However, the discussions related to alternative political arrangements, governance, minority rights and their identities were suppressed altogether along with the defeat of LTTE by the state forces in 2009.

¹ Census Department, Census of Population and Housing Report 2012, Colombo: Sri Lanka

² Ahmed Zarin, "Contours of Muslim nationalism in Sri Lanka," South Asian History and Culture 3, No.02. (2012): 278

From then on, the majority Buddhist extremists and some ethnocentric parties, with their triumphalist attitude, had come to prominence and tried to shape up the public discussion by portraying Muslims as ‘new other’ or ‘enemy within’. As a result, Muslims had been economically, psychologically and demographically targeted. Newly emerged majoritarian racist movements and political parties such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya and Sinhala Urumaya started to spread hate and bigotry against Muslims such as systematic campaigns focusing on humiliating Islamic rituals, Muslims cultural practices and boycotting Muslims’ shops. In this regard, the Secretariat for Muslims of Sri Lanka, an independent NGO, had registered around 600 incidents against Muslims from 2013 until 2015³.

The worst-case scenario had unfolded in 2014 when a large-scale communal violence started to spread destroying millions of rupees worth of assets and properties of Muslims in the South-western city of ‘Aluthgama’. Obviously, the ‘Aluthgama tragedy’ did not only happen at the peak of hate campaigns against Muslims amid growing minor level of physical attacks that lasted for five years, but also it was marked as one of the ‘darkest days’ in recent history of the Sri Lankan Muslims.⁴ From the Aluthgama catastrophe up until now, the hate campaign and direct attacks on economic assets of Muslims have been periodically rising whereas the sequence of the anti-Muslim violence has become very narrow unlike before ‘Aluthgama Tragedy’. From

³ Secretariat for Muslims of Sri Lanka is an independent NGO based in Colombo. It is an institution assisting with coordination among Muslim civil society organizations, conducting researchers on issues of relevance to the Sri Lankan Muslim community, developing policy recommendations to concerned actors on issues relevant to diverse Muslim communities in the country. In addition, it has documented all the hate incidents over the period of 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively.

⁴ Aluthgama is cosmopolitan city of South-Western part of Sri Lanka where the deadliest communal violence, in the recent history, against Muslims occurred. This incident and its aftermath is extensively elaborated and discussed in the chapter titled as ‘Stories in the aftermath of Aluthgama’ written by Dr. Farzana Hanniffa. It is a chapter of an edited work, edited by John Clifford Holt and published by Oxford University Press, which covers anti-Muslim violence and its relationship with Buddhist nationalism in the post-war context of Sri Lanka.

November 2017 to May 2018, three major Muslims villages namely Kandy, Ampara and Gintota, were vandalized and burned down at large scales.

In such situations, the state did not respond with strong legalistic measures to curtail the spread of violence. Partly because when the state was fighting with Tamil Tigers separatist organization, political bargaining had been considered by the Muslim minority as an effective tool of leverage in shaping the interests of the state in favor of them. Once the war ended, the state dependence on Sri Lankan Muslim minority had largely been diminished over last ten years. In addition to that, the victorious momentum was hijacked for political mobilization and systematic marginalization of minorities by the post-war nationalistic Mahinda Rajapaksha government. The Amnesty International's following condemnation letter, that accused the state's lack of willingness to ensure security of the Muslim minority after the 'Aluthagama tragedy', highlighted the whole terrifying climate. It stated:

*"This is the worst outbreak of communal violence in Sri Lanka in years and there is a real risk of it spreading further. The government must do everything in its power to end it immediately, while respecting the human rights of all concerned. Those responsible for killings and other acts of violence must be held to account, and at-risk Muslim communities given the protection they need,"*⁵

The lack of state responses created an unprecedented pressure upon the Muslim minority. Therefore, they had been forced to work on a broader platform and engage with new and different sorts of uncalculated scenarios. Within this context, Muslim community-based organizations had come to prominence on behalf of Muslim community and started to play a vital role in building reconciliation efforts such as advocacy, inter-ethnic trust building initiatives, awareness projects, religious programs

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/06/sri-lanka-act-now-prevent-further-bloodshed-anti-muslim-violence/>

and lobbying. All Ceylon Jammiyatul Ulama, National Shoor Council, Sri Lanka Jamath E Islami, Muslim Council of Sri Lanka and Jamatu Salamah were few of those community-based organizations that had taken the lead in the Muslim minority in the post-war context reconciliation efforts.

It is noteworthy, the key factor that prompted Muslim organizations to the front in this struggle for survival was the general understanding that newly emerged challengers could not be tackled solely depending on Muslim politicians or their parliamentary debates. Instead, multiple dimensions of the crisis and its complexity, including international Islamophobic atmosphere, had required full scale rearrangement of Muslim minority with a long-time strategic planning. For the last ten years, Muslim community-based organizations have been relentlessly developing and implementing the strategies and new way-outs in the name of reconciliation and social harmony in order to minimize the growing tense situation between majority Buddhists and minority Muslims. Hence, this phenomenon warrants a detailed scholarly work in order to understand the survival strategies of Muslim minority as a political community and its impact on the society, on the one hand and alleviating the tense situation among the communities, in general.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In this research, an investigation will be carried out to find out how Sri Lankan Muslims have been responding to the post-war systemic violence against them as a minority community, its consequences, and impacts. As mentioned in the background, it is obvious that Muslim community-based organizations have been working and taking the lead in responding to the post-war systematic attacks and the continuation of strategic moves of majoritarian extremists' elements in marginalizing the Muslim minority of Sri

Lanka. Hence, there is a general academic interest to find out what are the survival strategies of them, and its impact in managing the post-war communal violence. Thus, this is a monumental opportunity, for academics, to understand how Sri Lankan Muslim minority strategizes their survival through lenses of their community-based organizations and how do they interplay with the current unfolding massive changes in the Sri Lankan context.

On the other hand, this growing interest has produced a critical observation with regard to the responses of Muslim community in general. It is the shocking reconciliatory reaction of Muslim minority towards systematic violence against them by majoritarian radicals with the state protection. The observation has led to a puzzling question in the next stage; why Sri Lankan Muslim minority had resorted to such an attitude while most of the politicians predicted that the community would react radically and rely on violent means in order to survive and assert itself given international climate of so-called Muslim radicalism, in particular and theories of minority radicalization, in general.

Moving further, the general observation and the subsequent question triggered a heated public debate within the community and outsiders alike on whether the reconciliatory strategies pursued by Muslim community-based organizations have a transformative impact on de-escalating the violence prone-mood and ethnocentric majoritarian fabric of the country. Some segments of the people who participated in the discussion argued that Muslim community-based organizations are still far away from understanding the comprehensive dimensions of the problem. As a result, they stated that those organizations had been struggling to produce tangible and impactful outcome from the mechanism which they invented in order to respond to the crisis. The rest went against above argument and counted the positive aspects of the struggle. Such two

opposing discourses about the role of Muslim community-based organizations have become a contested narrative in the contemporary Sri Lanka. Based on the researcher's involvement in the process for the last ten years, it seems that this is a unique phenomenon which warrants an intellectual inquiry in order to settle and direct debate by digging deep into the inner dimensions of the Sri Lankan Muslim community-based organizations and their thinking of salvation amid the current turbulent environment.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why are the Muslim community-based organizations seen as better alternatives in ensuring political survival of the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka?
2. How do the strategies of the Muslim community-based organizations contribute to political survival of the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka?
3. What are the impacts of the strategies in defusing the different aspects of violence against Muslim minority in Sri Lanka?

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the perception and role of Sri Lankan Muslim community-based organizations towards and in an ethno-centric majoritarian state.
2. To understand the strategies of the Muslim community-based organizations in responding to the anti- Muslim Communal Violence.
3. To evaluate the overall impacts of strategies of Muslim community-based organizations in defusing different aspects of violence.

1.5 JUSTIFICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Theoretical Justification

The justification of this research can be discussed from three perspectives, including its contribution to theory building, social change and policy making. Firstly, this is an academic endeavor that seeks to explore the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka and their survival strategies, as a collective community, in facing the ethnic distrust, deploying a theoretical framework of minorities and their political struggle. Hence, the findings of this research will contribute to the enrichment of the contemporary debate related to theorizing minority reactions to majoritarian oppressions, on the one hand and majority-minority relationship, on the other hand in an ethno-centric context.

Social Justification

This research is important in understanding as well as assessing the current strategies of Muslim community-based organizations in managing the communal violence. Since the anti-Muslim violence started, Muslim community-based organizations have diversified its strategies to counter the growing Islam-phobic tendency and systemic violence, but the communal violence has been on rise and hence, that has created a dilemma and a frustration within Sri Lankan Muslims whether they are moving in the right direction in managing and mitigating the violence. In this respect, this research finding might contribute to re-evaluate and reshape their way of dealing with the situation as a whole and eventually, it will lead to de-construct the dilemma and produce a broader vision for them in the future.

Policy Justification

Finally, this research may be useful to make concrete policies in relation to mitigating the anti-Muslim violence, in particular and empowering democratic credentials, in general in the post-war Sri Lanka. Most significantly, Sri Lankan government is struggling to develop a suitable proposal to realize the reconciliation and co-existence among ethnic communities. Moreover, its officials agreed upon a very healthy view that distrust between communities could threaten stability of the state machinery in the long run. The government believes that this phenomenon has led to state of stagnancy in terms of acquiring investments and aids while it tarnished the international image of the state. Besides, Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic nature should be streamlined to a productive source of empowerment rather than a tool of de-stabilization in the country. Hence, the government is working towards initiation of quality peace building projects and cross-religious events which will downsize the gap and narrow down the distance among different communities of Sri Lanka. At this stage, these research findings can help to explain the concerns, perceptions, and experiences of Muslim community in terms of facing the systemic features of the crisis. This will nourish and produce some critical adding to the ongoing governmental and non-governmental projects and may direct policy-making process with regard to the minority protection.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

This review attempts to critically analyze the significant scholarly interventions with regard to the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka. Researching on Sri Lankan Muslim minority or Muslim minority in Sri Lanka has been an attractive academic area of interest to local and international academics alike for the last fifty years or so. One of the notable reasons behind this scholastic enthusiasm is that the historical, cultural and