The perils of being a woman and a Muslim

Problematic narratives about Muslims make the present moment in Sri Lankan politics dangerous

As Sri Lanka struggles to bring itself together three months after the deadly Easter Sunday attacks, the country’s Muslims continue to face constant scrutiny, with the security apparatus and reactionary forces turning their violent gaze on them.

The enhanced surveillance across the country since the bombings has disrupted the educational and economic life of Muslims. Chauvinist groups have repeatedly called for boycott of Muslim businesses and trade, even though Muslim communities have unequivocally condemned the Easter blasts attributed to a local hard-line Islamist group.

Sri Lanka’s Muslim minority, constituting about 10% of the island’s population, has faced several bouts of violence in the past. The LTTE evicted the Muslims en masse from the north in 1990 and carried out massacres against them in the east. In the years following the civil war, hate and violence have largely originated from Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists, often led by influential saffron-robed monks. Over the last decade, Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism has primarily targeted Muslims, whereas previously Tamils earned their ire.

Targeting Muslim women

In this context, there is an urgent need to resist efforts to alienate the Muslim community. Of greater concern is the systematic targeting of Muslim women through attempts to regulate their attire and mobility, in the name of security, as was seen in a circular of the Ministry of Public Administration. Discrimination began to manifest in every corner of the island following the blasts, as accounts by Muslim women at a recent forum in Jaffna showed. They spoke of harassment in marriage, forced sterilisation, making contorted claims about a declining Sinhala population and flagging unsubstantiated statistics on religious conversions – all unfailingly used a gendered discourse, focusing on Sinhala women’s bodies. Such an attempt at consolidating a pure Sinhala Buddhist identity will repress not only Muslims and other minorities, but also those seen as dissidents within the Sinhala majority community.

With presidential elections expected this year, it is the contest for state power and those political forces seeking to gain electorally by riding on the anti-Muslim rhetoric that will likely intensify the attacks in the months to come. In this interregnum of forming new alliances, regressive Tamil and Hindu nationalist forces too will likely fuel protests against Muslims to gain political points.

Complicity of liberals, the Left

It is not just the supporters of the Rajapaksa camp who are being swept by the troubling anti-Muslim sentiments. The complicity of liberal and Left groups in abetting the discourse makes an alternative politics a challenging task. Influenced by the global discourse on Islamophobia and ‘burqa’ bans in the West, these groups support similar reactions at home.

Invariably, Muslim women are made the pretext for any urgent calls for liberal reform of Muslim religious practices, laws, attire, educational institutions and curriculum in the post-Easter attacks scenario. There is little reflection on the discursive constructions of saving the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ and how it might lead to more repression.

The underlying focus on women enables the ideological attack on Muslims to permeate via misogynistic forces deep into society. Even the male Muslim leadership prohibited women from attending Tarawih prayers in mosques this year, and responded mutely to face veil bans.

If chauvinist forces are attempting to demonise the entire Muslim community, Left and liberal actors are engaged in inculcating the Muslim citizen worthy of acceptance by Sri Lankan society. Liberals adopt a language of tolerance, where differences are permissible, only as long as they are acceptable to the mainstream and adhere to majoritarian governance. Their preferred image of a ‘good’ Muslim is one that is synonymous with elite middle-class Muslims, favouring a return to a romanticised past before the influence of ‘Arabisation’. The liberals claim Muslim religion and lifestyle were Sri Lankan before working-class migrants returned from the Gulf. The classist liberal discourse attempts to alienate some Muslims while embracing others as Sri Lankans.

Convergence of different problematic narratives about Muslims is what makes the present moment in Sri Lankan politics dangerous and slippery. Muslim women are resisting these attacks by defying the restrictions placed on their mobility and confronting the myths being spread about their community. However, Muslims alone cannot take on state power and those political forces. Liberals, the Left and confronting the myths being made the pretext for any urgent calls for liberal reform of Muslim religious practices, laws, attire, educational institutions and curriculum in the post-Easter attacks scenario. There is little reflection on the discursive constructions of saving the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ and how it might lead to more repression.

The underlying focus on women enables the ideological attack on Muslims to permeate via misogynistic forces deep into society. Even the male Muslim leadership prohibited women from attending Tarawih prayers in mosques this year, and responded mutely to face veil bans.

If chauvinist forces are attempting to demonise the entire Muslim community, Left and liberal actors are engaged in inculcating the Muslim citizen worthy of acceptance by Sri Lankan society. Liberals adopt a language of tolerance, where differences are permissible, only as long as they are acceptable to the mainstream and adhere to majoritarian governance. Their preferred image of a ‘good’ Muslim is one that is synonymous with elite middle-class Muslims, favouring a return to a romanticised past before the influence of ‘Arabisation’. The liberals claim Muslim religion and lifestyle were Sri Lankan before working-class migrants returned from the Gulf. The classist liberal discourse attempts to alienate some Muslims while embracing others as Sri Lankans.

Convergence of different problematic narratives about Muslims is what makes the present moment in Sri Lankan politics dangerous and slippery. Muslim women are resisting these attacks by defying the restrictions placed on their mobility and confronting the myths being spread about their community. However, Muslims alone cannot take on the ideological onslaught. Only a collective struggle by progressive sections of society confronting the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist, global Islamophobic and misogynistic narratives building against Muslims can prevent the country from heading in the direction of a disastrous, possibly fascist, path.

Niyanthini Kadirgamar is a researcher and a member of the Jaffna People’s Forum for Coexistence.