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## The National Identity of Sri Lankan Muslims: Complementarity, Constitutional Constraint, and the Politics of Asymmetric Pluralism

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the way in which the Sri Lankan Muslims define their national identity. The society started with the Arab-Indian sea merchants and was subsequently referred to as Moors by the colonizers. Since they are distributed all over the island and lack one homeland, they are primarily religious and not ethnic or territorial. One of the main constitutional concerns that is raised in the study is that Sri Lanka permits the use of the Muslim Personal Law in state-controlled Quazi courts but the constitution grants Buddhism a pre-eminent place, meaning that Muslims are given preference but not equal treatment. Social studies indicate that majority of the Sri Lankan Muslims view Islam and national identity as coexistent and deny the fact that they have to make a choice between the two. However, the continued ethnic violence and increased majority nationalism are indications that the integration of Muslims into the national identity is conditional and unstable which may not be fully established.

**Keywords:** Ethno-religious politics, Muslim Personal Law, national identity, religious minority rights, Sri Lankan Muslims.

### Introduction

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious island country which boasts of a population of approximately 22 million. Traditionally, the national identity of Sri Lanka was mostly determined by ethnic and religious processes (Ali, 2004; Imtiyaz, 2020). The majority of the population (almost 70 percent) is Sinhalese Buddhists (Razick et al., 2020). Other significant minorities are Hindus, comprising majority of

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the Tamils at an approximate of 12.6 per cent and Christians at 7.4 and Muslims (Arkam & Shehu, 2024; Department of Census and Statistics, 2023b).

Moor, which is also referred to as the Sri Lankan Muslim community (Imtiyaz, 2020), is approximately 9-10 percent of the total population of the country; that is, 1.9 million people, as per the 2023 census (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023b). Contrary to the Sinhalese and Tamil community whose identity is largely determined by language and ethnicity, Muslim people in Sri Lanka have always identified themselves as one culture, mainly due to their common religious beliefs, Islam (Imtiyaz & Mohamed Saleem, 2023). This very identity foundation means they do not fit into ethno-linguistic structures that rule in Sri Lanka and, in turn, their relations with national identity are particularly complicated and in some instances, politically tense (Razick et al., 2021).

This article will argue that the Sri Lankan Muslims do not perceive a contradiction between their religion and their nationality (Mahroof & Razick, 2023). They consider themselves as full-fledged Sri Lankan and constantly want to be equal in the national life of the country (DeVotta, 2020). However, their perception of themselves is a hierarchical constitutionalism. The state follows the policy approach, which is called as an asymmetric pluralism (DeVotta, 2020), a policy structure combining the necessary safeguards of minority rights, particularly legal pluralism such as the Muslim Personal Law (MPL) (Nur Abdurakhman, 2025), and the introduction of strict boundaries of equality in restoring the constitutional primacy of Buddhism (Gomez, 2022). As a result, in spite of the fact that the sense of Muslim identity is internally consistent and combative, it is externally manipulated and under constant structural pressure (Basu & Hettiarachchi, 2025).

This paper examines the ways in which the Sri Lankan Muslims comprehend and articulate their national belonging by referencing the insights of history, demographics, sociology and constitutional law. It is a blend of the knowledge of the academic literature and the official census data, qualitative fieldwork, to provide the detailed and broad perspective on the experiences of the community. This analysis will start with the historical background and socio-demographic traits of the Muslims in Sri Lanka and then the legal and constitutional frameworks that influence the position of the Sri Lankan Muslims as a minority. One of the main themes is the sociological process of identity negotiation, especially how the community is opposed and redefining the external stereotypes regarding the loyalty. Lastly, the study shows the impact of modern sociopolitical processes on the perception of patriotism among the community and its role in the larger context of Sri Lankan nation, and this is mainly the emergence of Buddhist nationalism and the surfacing of anti-Muslim tensions.

## Problem Statement

The main issue that is discussed in this study is the constant conflict between the feeling of national belongingness among the Sri Lankan Muslims. Though long-established in the country, and involved in political and civic life, the community more than once may have to put up with an external stereotype, which ethno-religious nationalism magnifies, in their supposedly prioritizing a global, pan-Islamic identity

over their commitment to Sri Lanka. This perception creates a perception of sociopolitical insecurity making the community to assert themselves countless times by proving their allegiance to the nation. At the core of the matter lies the balancing act between the self-proclaimed equality of the Muslims as an equal partner in the Sri Lankan society, and the constitutionality of the asymmetric pluralism. This system protects their religious rights and at the same time puts them in a system that favors the majority.

### Research Objectives

1. To examines the historical background, current peculiarities, and sociolinguistic attributes of the Sri Lankan Muslim community with specific references to the way in which its members have been negotiating their identity as a dual one. It shows how, to the Sri Lankan Muslims, Islamic religious devotion does not mean they are opposing their Sri Lankan national identity.
2. To consider critically the model of unusual Sri Lankan pluralism where rights of the minority are exercised on the basis of a constitution under which Buddhism has preemption in the context of Article 9. Also evaluate the role of the increasing majoritarian nationalism and intermittent anti-Muslim animosity on the aspect of Muslim security and their conditional nature within the national structure.

### Foundations of the Community: Historical Genesis and Sociolinguistic Profile

#### Historical Origins: From Arab Traders to the 'Moors'

The historical evolution of the Sri Lankan Muslim community proves the presence of many years on the island (Sulaiman Lebbe, 2021) and the differences between its origin and history of the other major ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. The history of the community goes back to Arab traders who started sailing along the Indian Ocean as early as the seventh century CE (Karmwar, 2025; Zreik, 2025). By the eighth century they had acquired structured commercial systems in Sri Lanka (Abdul Raheem & Khan, 2024). Gradually, most of these traders moved permanently to the island and got married to the local groups (Saujan, Haniffa, et al., 2022). This gave rise to the earliest generations who eventually became the Sri Lankan Muslims.

Colonialism altered the community patterns and settlement of Muslims in Sri Lanka (Ullah, 2025). The case of the Portuguese invasion in the sixteenth century was particularly disastrous in that the colonialists attacked and destroyed the Muslim settlements along the coasts leading to a sudden reduction in the number of inhabitants (Amarasinghe, 2024; Silva, 2024). As a reaction against this persecution, a large number of Muslims had to immigrate to the interior, where the King of Kandy gave them refuge and chances of settlement in the hill country and the east of the island (Silva, 2024).

Following colonial times, introduced additional levels to the Muslim diversity of Sri Lanka. In the 17th and 18th centuries under Dutch rule (and on British rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries), a number of Muslim communities established

themselves on the island (Bastin & de Silva, 2020). Markedly, the Malay and Javanese Muslims came to the island through the Dutch East India Company; they constitute the present-day Sri Lankan Malay ethnic group (van Rossum, 2020). South Asians, Indian Moors, Pashtuns and Baluchs, Muslims also came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Shah et al., 2022). They contributed to the religious life of the island by introducing and spreading the Hanafi and Shafi school of Islamic jurisprudence which additionally influenced the legal and cultural life in Sri Lanka (Faizi & Ali, 2024; Saujan, Mohamed, et al., 2022).

The formation of the group identity was mostly a political process, which started in the times of the colonialism. They were referred to as Moors by the early European settlers who borrowed the word to refer to the Muslim Moors of Iberia and when they mercifully used it (Oteo-Garcia et al., 2025), it was due to their Muslims religion. This label disregarded the fact that the community had various origins and followed various school of Islamic law. As time went, the majority of Tamil-speaking Muslims were put together by colonialists as a single people under the heading, Ceylon or Sri Lankan Moors (Conversion, 2024). They officially separated this group of people with Tamils and Sinhalese. Historically speaking, religious affiliation which was Islam was the main identity marker way before stiffer ethnic labels were invented.

### The Absence of a Territorial Homeland and Legal Consequence

The Muslims of Sri Lanka are not concentrated in one homeland, but they are distributed all over the island (Chattoraj & Basu, 2023). This is unlike the Sinhalese and Tamil communities who have always been affiliated with a particular region. In the Eastern coast, where Ampara, Trincomalee, and Batticalo are in the majority, nearly a third of the Muslims are found (Vickneswaran, 2022). There they build powerful local communities with Sinhalese and Tamil citizens. However, elsewhere, e.g. in the urban and agricultural regions of the Southwest, e.g. Colombo, Galle and Puttalam, Muslims are a rather scattered minority.

The geographical fact had a profound influence on the way the Muslim world was ruled. Under the colonial rule, Muslims were simply defined by law as one, island wide community and under a unified system of laws, which was called Mohammedan personal law (Fowzul, 2024; Saujan et al., 2025). This meant that Muslims were no longer characterized by regional or territorial borders. Rather, they over time became an ethnic and social group, which is united by certain religious identity, shared communal institutions; mosques, schools and religious courts, and a standard legal system, and not by belonging to a particular homeland or territory (Senanayake, 2021).

The Muslims of Sri Lanka do not have a well-demarcated homeland territory, and this has influenced their politics greatly. The leaders of the Muslim communities were historically not in a position to associate their sense of identity as a group or their political needs to a sovereign regional area, unlike the Sinhales or the Tamils (Imtiyaz & Mohamed-Saleem, 2025). As a result, Muslim national identity in Sri Lanka is still mostly abstract, and is constructed primarily through religious affiliation and interest with the central state as opposed to controlling the territory and having a specific linguistic identity (Imtiyaz & Mohamed-Saleem, 2025). This dynamic over

time became to entrench Islam as the number one marker of Muslim communal identity, a position further consolidated by the formation of a special Ministry (or Department) of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs in the 1980s (Gomez, 2022).

### Contemporary Demographics and Geographic Distribution

The Sri Lankan Muslims are one of the most ancient and prevalent minority groups of the country. They were estimated to have a population of between 1.8 and 2.0 million or approximately 9-10 percent of the total population in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023a). The most authoritative official data, national census of 2023, indicates 1,892,638 Muslims and this represents 9.3 percent of the national population, which is 20.3 million (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023a). These figures are still the major point of reference in both academic and policy analyses of Muslim demographic in Sri Lanka though more recent census data is not yet available.

The Muslims are not homogeneously distributed in the entire Sri Lanka, there are high populations in specific regions due to historical settlement patterns, trade routes, and the colonial influence (Saujan & Razick, 2021). The western side of the country in and around Colombo, the commercial capital as well, has the greatest number of Muslims. This indicates a long tradition of trade and urban living of the community. There is also a high Muslim population in the eastern part of the island that dates back to many centuries. The eastern province by itself is home to approximately 576,000 Muslims making it one of the largest Muslim communities in the country (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023b).

In addition to these, large populations of Muslims can be found in the North-Western, Central and North-Central Provinces. Muslims are generally concentrated in urban and semi-urban districts in the Central Province and in the North-Western and the North-Central areas take up a rural and semi-rural lifestyle. In general, Muslims are also clustered around coastal belts, market towns and urban centres, this is due to the old trade routes and the internal migration.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka have been actively trading and carrying out business. They operate retail outlets, wholesale business and small and medium enterprises (Bastin & de Silva, 2020). Fishing is also popular with many of them, particularly at the coast, and rice is cultivated at the Eastern and North-Central provinces (Ibrahim, 2020). These studies ensure that the local livelihoods are supported and also assimilate the economy among the ethnically and religiously diverse communities.

The table below gives a table of detailed provincial distribution of the Muslim population using the 2012 Census data and this offers a better understanding of their distribution across the Sri Lankan territory.

Table 1: Sri Lankan Muslim Population Distribution by Province (2012 Census Data)

Province	Muslim Population (Absolute)	% of Total Muslim Population
Western	709,992	37.5%
Eastern	575,936	30.4%

North-Western	268,709	14.2%
Central	263,874	13.9%
North-Central	101,958	5.4%
Other Provinces (Combined)	(Remaining Population)	8.6%

### Sociolinguistic Characteristics

The language of the Sri Lankan Muslims is diverse although majority of the people speak Tamil (Sarjoon, 2025). This is an indication of the long interaction period, settlement patterns and cultural assimilation with Tamil-speaking regions. Tamil is the most common language spoken in homes of most Muslims, in their day-to-day activities, discussions within the family, teaching of their religion, and in socializing with other communities. Such continuity in language aids in social interaction and passing of the culture through the generations (Chattoraj, 2022; Sarjoon, 2025).

Meanwhile, the trends of linguistic assimilation can also be seen more clearly, in the southwestern parts of Sri Lanka, where the Muslims coexist with the Sinhalese speaking majority (Dassanayake, 2024). Bilingualism is often functional among the youngsters of the community in these regions, who attend schools of Sinhali medium and engage themselves more in the social, educational, and economic development of the larger community (Mahroof & Razick, 2023). This movement is not the loss of heritage language, but it is a practical reaction to the language of realities in the institutions and structures of the state.

The Sri Lankan Malay that was born out of Malay settlers maintained a smaller but culturally significant group of Sri Lankan Muslims. Even though there are fewer speakers of the language today, it is still used as a significant landmark of distinct ethnic background among the wider Muslim population, indicating the multi-layered and multi-faceted Muslim identity in Sri Lanka.

The growing Sinhalese usage particularly among the younger and educated population is more of an integration measure and not of assimilation. Good Sinhalese will ensure that people get involved in politics, get better employment, and get a good education, thereby reducing the chances of being sidelined in Sinhalese-dominated areas. In a majority-rule state, Sinhalese is an endure and survive strategy.

More importantly, the Sri Lankan Muslims do not base their identity on language as the main axis. Islam is the primary defining factor of the community. This emphasis on religion enables Muslims to bridge the Tamil-Sinhalese language and political chasm. They stand themselves out as a differentiated but also amalgamated group in national life. The community maintains the boundaries within itself by keeping religion as the most important distinguishing characteristic and to make sure that language integration would not result in total incorporation into the Sinhalese socio-political system (Dassanayake, 2024).

## Legal Pluralism and Constitutional Status: Recognition Without Parity

The system of legal and constitutional position of Muslims in Sri Lanka is developed through a well-balanced yet unequal mechanism. Although Buddhism is provided with a special protection by the Constitution, the protection of the religious diversity and the rights of minorities is also assured. This twin structure acknowledges and safeguards the minority groups but does not put them in the same level as the majority religion. According to scholars, this arrangement is said to be a paradigm of constitutional tolerance without equality because they demonstrate that the state is ready to grant differences but does not provide complete religious equality.

### Legal Accommodation of Religious Identity

The Sri Lankan Constitution attempts to balance its adherence to Buddhism with the provision of the basic rights of all citizens. In article 9, the first position is taken by Buddhism and the state is mandated to safeguard and bring it up (Gomez, 2022). Concurrently, the Constitution guarantees the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in Article 10, equality before the law in Article 12 and the right to practice religion in worship, observance and expression in Article 14 (Gomez, 2022; Gunatilleke, 2023). These provisions form a system that safeguards the religious minorities, at the same time, providing the majority faith with a privileged position.

The constitution of Sri Lanka provides a legal concession to the Muslim citizens: the state officially acknowledges Muslim Personal Law (MPL). This is mainly enforced by the Muslim marriage and divorce act (MMDA) which enables Muslims to administer their marriage, divorce, and inheritance under the Islamic law (MPLRAG, 2017; Wettimuny & Rajap, 2018). To implement and enforce these rules, the state puts in place Quazi courts, which incorporate religious norms into the formal law (Saujan, 2021).

The legal pluralism in Sri Lanka is based on the long history of accommodating different forms of customary and religious law. The courts in Sri Lanka have generally been conservative in rulings on case issues that have concerned personal law, perceiving it as a safeguarded area which limits itself to the issue of religious liberty. In *Attorney-General v. The Supreme Court* has affirmed that personal laws constitute a category which is Constitutionally recognised (Ramachandran, 1982). Likewise, in *Saleem v. The Court*, in a case decided in 1999 by Mohamed (1999), did not nullify certain clauses of the Muslim Personal Law and it strengthened the notion that religious systems of laws possess some degree of autonomy in the constitution.

### Constitutional Tension and the Challenge to Equality

Even though courts have been lenient in accepting Muslim Personal Law in the past, such a law is not necessarily constitutional. It is a qualified privilege, which is increasingly undermined in current rights based legal discourses. With the development of constitutional jurisprudence, the Supreme Court has turned into being more sensitive to the tension between religious autonomy and the principle of equality before the law ensured in Article 12.

This strain was well brought out in *Weerawansa v. Attorney-General (2000)* in which the Court stated that any law (secular or religious) must go through a right review (Hasan et al., 2024). The implication of that ruling was a rejection of the long-time assumption that individual laws were not subject to constitutional review. It signified a shift towards a position in which religious legal frameworks need to adapt more and more to current norms of non-discriminatory and individual rights (Chandrasekaram, 2021). Consequently, although Muslim Personal Law is continuing to be constitutionally accommodated, it is now subject to a more scrutinized examination in the areas of gender equality and equal protection.

### Institutional Asymmetry: The Structure of Subordination

In addition to being legally recognized, Sri Lanka also provides institutional support of the Muslim religious life through the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs (AFRA & USHAMA, 2023). The department controls mosques, Hajj pilgrimages, manages waqf properties and propagates Islamic education (Nisardeen et al., 2025; Saujan & Mahazir, 2021). These are all indications that the state appreciates the existence of Islam and that it incorporates the Muslim religious issues in the mainstream government. Its direct involvement in the management of Hajj is particularly an attempt to make sure that Muslims engage in the civic life of the country.

This institutional accommodation, however, is conducted on a distinct hierarchy. The Ministry of Buddhasasana and religious affairs is the responsible body of the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs and its primary concern is the religious policy of Buddhism (Ramli et al., 2023). This disposition is symbolically and structurally enforced religious asymmetry because the minority religious administration is placed within a framework where the constitutional primacy of Buddhism is put to the forefront.

The structure is an example of a model of asymmetric pluralism, whereby the minority religions are recognized and fostered yet subordinated institutionally. Accommodation of the religious life of Muslims by the state is therefore conditional, the reason being to maintain social harmony and tradition and not to establish a religious neutrality and equal status. As such, even though the Muslim identity is constitutionally recognized and administered, it is placed in a framework that ultimately gives the Buddhist majority in the institutional and constitutional hierarchy of Sri Lanka.

### The Negotiation of National Belonging and Patriotism

#### Hybrid Identity and Stakeholder Status

The identity of the Sri Lankan Muslims is very complicated as it combines religion and nationality (Senanayake, 2021). They also identify themselves with a unique religious group and at the same time form part of the larger Sri Lankan nation. Religion has been a major source of identity of this community (Dassanayake, 2024). Sri Lankan Muslims have been relying on Islam and the community institutions as a way of remaining united despite gaps in the provinces and regions since they do not

have a home country. The most important institutions that have resulted in a social structure and enhanced a sense of belonging are mosques, religious schools, and charity organizations.

Due to this history, national identity among the Sri Lankan Muslims has been abstract (Nur Abdurakhman, 2025). It is not only being defined by the language, ethnicity, or territory, but also the concepts of faith and statehood are interlaced. This implies that one could be both Muslim and Sri Lankan, but could never be only one and thus, there always had to be some negotiation between religious loyalty and civic identity. This duality has over the years influenced the social, political and cultural relationship within the community, how the community manages to find their ways in a nation that is multicultural.

Currently the majority of Sri Lankan Muslims think that their nationality does not contradict with their religion (Mahroof & Razick, 2023). Their theme is that they are able to be both Sri Lankan and Muslim (Ramli et al., 2023). Studies indicate that they have patriotic feeling. They attend with great zeal national ceremonies and independence celebrations. They also highlight that their religion makes them more loving towards the country and not less loving (Mahroof & Razick, 2023). The community aims at being seen as equal partners of the life of the nation. They desire to be full stakeholders with other groups.

The political process of the community in the recent decades has become more and more characterized by a common identity. The multilingualism and alliances between the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the association corresponding to the 1980s, were vividly promoted by the movements such as Muslim Congress (Zacky et al., 2021). Such attempts were a conscious attempt at presenting Muslims as entirely nationals with any separatist notion being negated. This is the strategy that would appeal to younger Muslim leaders who understand Sinhala. Their goal is to play a significant role in the larger Sinhalese dominated society and keep up to their customs of Islam.

### Countering the 'Divided Loyalty' Stereotype

One of the greatest obstacles to attaining national integration among the Sri Lankan Muslims is a long-standing stereotype of some members of the majority population (Arkam & Shehu, 2024). They believe that Muslims place more loyalty to the international Muslim people, *ummah*, rather than to Sri Lanka. This image tends to result in baseless allegations of split loyalties, particularly in the event of minor incidences, including saying one is in support of a visiting foreign cricket team (Johansson, 2025).

According to the Muslim leaders and scholars, religiosity never contradicts the sense of national pride (Mahmudulhassan et al., 2024). This can be seen in surveys and interviews in which the community widely dismisses the notion of divided loyalties but they consider Islamic religion and Sri Lankan identity as complementary, not competing, with each other (Mahmudulhassan et al., 2024).

National belonging should not be assumed among Muslims, but has to be proved and bargained upon constantly. Muslims are required to demonstrate their patriotism publicly and over and over again, a process which is not done by the majority of

citizens whose citizenship is automatic (Mahmudulhassan et al., 2024). They accomplish this by emphasizing secular icons like national flag, national anthem and heroes as well as exercising the faith. The struggle between being both devout and a proud Sri Lankan is one that cannot be done away with since the community is aware of the fact that its allegiance is frequently questioned. To overcome negative stereotypes, Muslims also stress that their religion encourages respect to the state and civic duty and, thus, proves that a religious commitment and national loyalty can go together.

### Political Symbolism and the Debate on Nomenclature

Even the name by which the community is referred to points at the sensitivity of identity in the Sri Lankan popular discourse. The term Sri Lankan Muslims is a term whose meaning can be interpreted in various ways (Imtiyaz & Mohamed-Saleem, 2025). Taken literally as it is, that is, Sri Lankan and Muslim, it implies a feeling of belonging equally to both the country and the religion (Ratnam & Arambewela-Colley, 2024). However, when taken to mean Sri Lankan, but Muslims may subtly make it mean in reference to the fact that their national identity is subordinate to their religious identity.

Following the misunderstanding that the phrasing evokes, several commentators in the public have proposed an alteration that it be renamed into Muslim Sri Lankans. This reflects the word of Buddhist Sri-Lankans or Hindu Sri-Lankans and puts the national identity first and language as a hidden tool of reinforcing a sense of belonging (Gajasinghe & Jayakodi, 2022). Though these issues are not addressed by merely switching labels, these debates demonstrate a common wish among communities to underline unity in the midst of diversity. Community leaders and policy makers will tend to encourage such moves as it will serve as a way of highlighting the shared national identity and presenting all citizens in the same inclusive national context (Dassanayake, 2024).

### Contemporary Sociopolitical Challenges and Majoritarian Constraints

#### The Rise of Ethno-Religious Nationalism and Communal Violence

Over the past couple of years, the national identity of the Sri Lankan Muslims has been under serious stress. It is mostly because Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism has been on the steep increase since the beginning of the 2000s (Tudor & Slater, 2021). The ethno-religious extremism has been on the rise and has constantly targeted the Muslim community. Consequently, they experience a lot of insecurity and increasing marginalization.

Several violent episodes have been manifested in the time of increased tension. It is worth noting that anti-Muslim riots, which were usually instigated by extremist fringe movements, took place in 2014, 2018, and 2019 (Subedi, 2022). These cases demonstrate that in the times of severe religious riots, human lives and property are under threat of being severely damaged (Razick et al., 2021; Saujan et al., 2024).

The Muslim community itself turned out to be a victim of the Islamist terrorism, ironically. The most tragic one was the Easter bombings in 2019 by a local extremist group (Imtiyaz, 2020; Saujan et al., 2024). The Sri Lankan Muslim community in general responded promptly and categorically, and once more declared their unwavering adherence to peace and coexistence. They were also well conscious that any form of hesitation would only serve to support the negative stereotypes of divided loyalty and provide grounds on which the majority would continue to discriminate against them.

### Response to Extremism: Internal Condemnation and Legislative Restriction

The reaction of the state to these challenges has been subtle, accommodating and restrictive. In the institutional level, the 1978 constitution acknowledges Islam as one of the four major religions of the country and protects the exercise of the religion (Gomez, 2022; Gunatilleke, 2023). Since the 1980s, the government agencies have struggled to have the Muslim citizens actively involved in the national policies and structures. Most Muslims believe that the policies adopted by the state tend to give advantage to mainstreams. As an example, there are religious conversions laws suggested and, more to the point, administrative actions against religious clothing and expression, which are often defended as national security issues (Hakeema et al., 2021).

The narratives of security are utilized with a purpose in mind, and they demonstrate how security can be a highly political instrument and how the freedoms are usually conditional. When a communal tension is on the increase, the state is more likely to enforce measures that are more likely to affect the Muslim population than others, blaming the rest of the population in the actions of a fringe group (Attanayake et al., 2019). By doing so, the constitutional rights to religious expression are effectively reduced to conditional rights since the structural susceptibility of the minority groups in an unequal system is being revealed. The intent of the state is also evident: it relies on the security mechanisms and laws to support the majoritarian preferences strengthening the notion that the rights are given selectively, and are not enforced in an unbiased manner. Consequently, Muslims have to remain particularly alert of any laws and policies that build a Buddhism-centric orientation.

### Contingent Political Influence

The Sri Lankan Muslims make up a very low percentage of the population of the country, but they have a history of making an overrepresented contribution to politics. Through prudent involvement in the coalition politics, the Muslim leaders and parties have ended up securing cabinet posts and seats in the parliament. This will enable them to support the interests of their community, facilitate the growth of the region, and add to the political stability, particularly within the Eastern Province. Throughout and following the civil war, the Muslim leaders were always in favor of the territorial integrity and constitutional rule of the nation. They put their community at the center of the national cohesion instead of being a separatist force.

Nevertheless, it is a fragile benefit. It also challenges more on alteration of electoral calculations than on solid constitutional assurances. The power of the Muslim representatives tends to decline when majoritarian governments are at their peak. This indicates that the voices of minorities are not as safe as they should be without good institutional protection and their purpose can be determined more by convenientness than necessity of the system.

## Conclusion

The Sri Lankan Muslims have a rich and developing national identity. It has been influenced by the long history of extensive settlement, colonial categorization as well as a strong attachment to Islam. Being the descendants of an early Arab-Indian trading community, the Sri Lankan Muslims have never denied their position of full, equal citizens of the country and they want to be regarded as full participants in the national narrative. It has been found that the majority of Muslims strongly oppose the very notion of divided loyalties, and they do not find any contradictions between their Islamic religion and their patriotism to Sri Lanka. To them, religion and patriotism do not oppose, and quite on the contrary, their faith tends to reinforce their sense of national belonging and their religious beliefs guide them.

External pressures are the biggest threats to Muslim identity in Sri Lanka. The old ethnic-nationalist stereotypes and the common communal violence always casts uncertainties of whether Muslims are part of the Sri Lankan society. The issue of inclusive citizenship in Sri Lanka is not based on the loyalty of the Muslim community but the response of the state and the society towards it. The country should no longer just tolerate constitutional equality, but seek the actual equality and parity. One of these is the conflict between the constitutional vow of religious liberty and the asymmetric pluralism enshrined in Article 9. The truth of the matter is that the rights of Muslims are formally recognized, theoretically safeguarded, but in actual sense are viewed and handled as secondary rights which are handled with care in the actual sense.

It is vital to encourage understanding between one another, and this should be provided via inclusive education and interfaith communication. It is also critical that the identity of Sri Lankan be made as inclusive as possible. The society should acknowledge and appreciate the fact that the Muslim community cares about the nation, and should not impose on them to constantly demonstrate their loyalty. Political and legislative change is needed to address long-standing structural inequalities, which will continue to exist in society to develop genuinely inclusive citizenship. It can be taken to mean the development of policies that are pluralist in their interpretation of the constitution, which is to balance the primacy of Article 9 with the guarantees that are provided by fundamental rights. In practice, this entails not only respecting and defending the pluralism of religion under Article 10 but also strict equality under Article 12, and environmentalism of the old regime of unequal pluralism which has been building social and legal hierarchies.

Policies that promote the use of inclusive language should be informed by debates on communal labels. As an illustration, we can call citizens Muslim Sri Lankans, Hindu Sri Lankans or Buddhist Sri Lankans. This little alteration is highly

symbolic. It contradicts the hierarchical perspectives and enhances national unity. Scholars and policymakers need to go on acknowledging and appreciating how communities have a multifaceted way of understanding themselves. The national narrative of Sri Lanka with its pluralist democratic foundation needs to declare that Sri Lankan Muslims are no less natural and authentic to Sri Lankan-ness than any other ethnic group. This goes beyond previous structures that had brought in a feeling of inferiority.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. All contributions were made objectively without any personal, financial, or institutional influence that could compromise the integrity of the work.

### Author's Contribution Statement

All authors have contributed significantly to the work and approved the final version of the manuscript. We believe that the findings of this study will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in Islamic thought and will be of interest to the readership of the journal.

1. **Mohommadu Nasheer Haseen:** conceptualized the research idea, designed the study, performed data analysis and interpreted the findings.
2. **Mohamed Hanifa Mohamed Sifkan & Ahmed Sarjoon Razick:** conducted the literature review, collected the data, and revised the manuscript critically for intellectual content, provided final editing, and coordinated the submission process.

### Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and academic integrity. All procedures were carried out responsibly, with informed consent obtained from participants (when applicable) and strict confidentiality maintained.

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