

## **Sri Lanka's Muslims Live with Fear and Discrimination Under a Secular Democratic System that Has a Proven Legacy of Failure in Securing the Rights of Religious Minorities**

### **News:**

On Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> June, all 9 Muslim ministers in President Maithripala Sirisena's cabinet resigned from their posts, after accusing the Sri Lankan government of failing to ensure the safety of the country's Muslim community from back clash attacks that followed the Easter Sunday bombings. The resignations came after thousands of people led by hardline communal Buddhist monks and groups demonstrated in the town of Kandy, demanding the expulsion of 2 Muslim provincial governors and one minister who they accused of having ties with the alleged bombers. Since the attacks in April, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka have lived under a cloud of suspicion and fear, with their Islamic beliefs accused of being associated with extremism. They have faced an atmosphere of intimidation, threats, harassment, demonisation and discrimination and there has been a tirade of hate-filled speech and fake news regarding Muslims and Islam disseminated on social media and other media outlets. On May 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, Sinhala mobs rampaged through at least 24 towns in western Sri Lanka, looting and attacking Muslim properties with stones, swords and petrol bombs in reprisal for the Easter bombings, destroying over 540 Muslim owned houses, shops and mosques as well as nearly 100 vehicles, according to local charities. Several innocent Muslims have also been killed in the latest spate of violence. Many have reported that police and army officers, who are also mainly from the country's Buddhist majority, simply watched on as these attacks unfolded, failing to stop the violence. Under current Emergency Laws, army forces have also arbitrarily searched Muslim homes, not simply for weapons but for any Islamic literature or CD's which are political in nature and could land those who possess them with an immediate term in prison. Alongside all this, there have been boycotts of Muslim businesses, and open discrimination against Muslims in employment and education. Muslim women and their daughters have been pressured to remove their Hijab when attending entrance interviews at schools. Furthermore, alongside the Niqab ban that the government has already enforced, a ban on Hijab and Jilbab on some government workers has been proposed.

### **Comment:**

Sri Lanka's politicians often pride themselves on having one the oldest democracies in the world. However, this current state of affairs as well as its past fragile history of relations between various ethnic and religious communities highlight how fickle, unpredictable and dangerous this man-made system of ruling is. Democracy is where the rights of religious minorities can be subject to the prejudices of the majority and the whims of opportunistic politicians. Many Muslims supported the current Sirisena government into power in the 2015 Presidential elections, hoping that it would mean an end to the communal rule of the Rajapaksa regime. In fact, many commentators stated that the Muslim vote was instrumental in Sirisena's victory into power. However, current political events should surely underscore to the Muslim

community how under the secular democratic system, politicians of all hues will ride the populist wave and pander to the prejudices and divisive influences of various sectors of their electorate to win votes, no matter how ‘extreme’, odious and inflammatory their views may be. In fact, the hard-line Buddhist monk and leader of the extremist nationalist Buddhist group, the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force or BBS), Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, who has long been accused of instigating hate and violence against Muslims, was released last month from jail and freed from a six-year sentence due to a presidential pardon from Sirisena. The upcoming presidential elections in the country this December, more likely than not, played a significant role in the decision. Indeed, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka is currently the latest political football in the game being played between various politicians and parties to curry favour with politically powerful Buddhist monks and groups and their supporters in preparation for these forthcoming elections...the same Buddhist monks and groups who are whipping up hysteria and fear against Muslims, and fanning the flames of hatred and communal division. How can any Muslim, indeed any religious or ethnic minority, believe that their rights can ever be safe under this system, or by engaging in the democratic process – which offers nothing but an illusion and broken promises of security and protection of rights. Allah (swt) says, **﴿وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ﴾** **“But those who disbelieved - their deeds are like a mirage in a lowland which a thirsty one thinks is water until, when he comes to it, he finds it is nothing but finds Allah before Him.”** [Al-Nur: 39]

We’ve seen the same story in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, India and other secular democratic states, which have imposed hijab, niqab or other bans on Islamic beliefs and practices, of how the wellbeing and rights of Muslims can be here today and gone tomorrow based upon the whims of whichever ruler or party is in power. Indeed, the Muslims in Sri Lanka have increasingly realized that within this highly charged anti-Muslim climate, nothing is off the table when it comes to the violation of their rights and wellbeing!

The Prophet (saw) said, **« لَا يُلْدَعُ الْمُؤْمِنُ مِنْ جُحْرٍ مَرَّتَيْنِ »** **“The believer should not be stung from the same hole twice.”** Surely these words from our beloved Messenger (saw), as well as the political realities we have observed in democratic states across the world, should be a stark reminder to us as Muslims that our security and rights will never be guaranteed under any man-made ruling system. Rather, the only state that will stand for our interests, protect our wellbeing, ensure a good standard of living and provide the believers a safe environment in which we can practice fully all our Islamic beliefs without harassment or fear, is the true Islamic leadership of the Khilafah state (Caliphate), governed solely by the Laws of the All-Knowing, the All-Wise – Allah (swt). Surely then, it is to the urgent establishment of this state that we as Muslims should turn our full attention and exert our full efforts!

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