

# Who Infected Whom? - Religio-Political Discourse Surrounding Sri Lanka's Pandemic Governance

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Sri Lanka's response to the COVID-19 pandemic occurred during a period of security challenges, political instability, and economic turmoil. The first case of COVID-19 in the country was contracted by a Chinese female national and was reported on January 27, 2020.<sup>1</sup> The individual was treated at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases in Angoda, Sri Lanka; this made local and global headlines, as the Health Minister (Pavithradevi Wanniarachchi) at the time sent her back to China with a kiss. Soon after, the same Health Minister made headlines for promoting a ‘syrup’ for treating COVID-19 and subsequently contracted the virus herself.<sup>2</sup> According to media reports, the syrup promoted by the Health Minister was a concoction of honey, nutmeg, spices, and ginger juice: a home remedy with no scientific basis as an effective countermeasure against COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> From the outset, it was clear that the government's response to COVID-19 included a mix of what claimed to be

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1. Meera Srinivasan, “Chinese Tourist in Sri Lanka Tests Positive for Coronavirus,” *The Hindu*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinese-tourist-in-sri-lanka-tests-positive-for-coronavirus/article30670031.ece>.
2. BBC, “Sri Lanka Minister Who Promoted ‘Covid Syrup’ Tests Positive,” January 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55780425>.
3. , “Sri Lanka Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Who Drank Sorcerer’s Virus Syrup, Tests Positive,” *The Standard*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/6/164081/Sri-Lanka-minister-Pavithra-Wanniarachchi,who-drank-sorcerer’s-syrup-for-virus-positive>.

scientifically grounded measures and unverified, non-scientific remedies.

Following the report of the first local case, the government took swift action to control the spread of the virus utilizing the police and the military. Between 2020 and 2021, the military operated 233 quarantine facilities island-wide and put in place a vaccination process once the vaccines were introduced to Sri Lanka. The military's involvement in operating quarantine centers in Sri Lanka allowed the Ministry of Health to reallocate resources to other preventive measures, leveraging the military's strengths in manpower surges, routine operations, facility security, and logistics.<sup>4</sup> The response to the first wave of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka was therefore highly successful and was commended by a number of international organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO):

The statistics reflect the success of the country's ability to respond to an epidemic, saving lives and protecting its population. The proactive and rapid preventive strategies that were implemented and the combined public health approach with strong leadership and whole of society approach have helped Sri Lanka to be in the position it is today.<sup>5</sup>

However, the third wave of COVID-19 in May 2020 led to a mass outbreak of infections which prompted the government to implement an island-wide lockdown. During the pandemic period, Muslims in Sri Lanka were accused of spreading the virus; they were stigmatized and systematically discriminated against. The government denied burial rites of Muslims on a “scientific basis,” claiming that burials of infected persons could contaminate ground water resources. While the government promoted this “scientific claim,” Muslims in Sri Lanka were marginalized and persecuted as they watched their kin being cremated without being able to perform

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4. Rathindra Kuruwita, “Military Involvement in Pandemic Control in Sri Lanka.” *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/military-involvement-in-pandemic-control-in-sri-lanka/>

5. Asanka Gunasekara, Pradeepa Dahanayake, Chulanee Attanayake, and Santina Bertone, “Paternalistic Leadership as a Double-Edged Sword: Analysis of the Sri Lankan President’s Response to the COVID-19 Crisis,” *Leadership* 18, no. 4 (2022): 501.

burial rites that conform with their religious beliefs.

Prior to the presentation of Sri Lanka's detailed COVID-19 plan, three main discursive events set the precedent for the analysis of the religio-political discourse surrounding Sri Lanka's COVID-19 response:

1. The claim of responsibility by the Islamic Levant for the Easter Sunday Attacks of April 2, 2019 (public discourse surrounding security, identity and religious extremism).
2. The presidential elections of November 2019 (a shift in political discourse on the themes of governance, security and national identity).
3. The parliamentary elections in August 2020 (discourses surrounding governance structures and state-society relations in the context of the pandemic).

The Easter Sunday Attacks on the 21st of April 2019 were the first major terror attacks on the island after the end of the civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE). The attacks were perpetrated by two local radical organizations—the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI)—and took place during the term of the 'Yahapalanaya' government headed by President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe between 2015 and 2019. This government was already fractured by October 2018, when the President Sirisena sacked the prime minister and unconstitutionally appointed the former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, as the prime minister. This coup, which lasted for 52 days, led to a cabinet reshuffle and ultimately eroded public trust in the government. When Gotabhaya Rajapaksa entered the presidential elections in November 2019, he won with a thumping majority, convincing his voters that he was the sole guarantor of security for the nation. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa served as the former secretary to the ministry of defense in Sri Lanka during the civil war, taking credit for the victory over the Tamil Tigers. His reputation as

a military man and as a ‘guarantor’ of national security, coupled with the failures of Sirisena as a statesman, culminated in his electoral victory.

Soon after his election, an interim cabinet was appointed. It was this interim cabinet that handled the first and second phases of the pandemic until the parliamentary elections in August 2020. Despite the pandemic spreading in Sri Lanka, parliamentary elections were held in August for Rajapaksa to consolidate power. As prime minister and head of the cabinet Gotabhaya’s brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, established a newly elected government.<sup>6</sup> It is amidst this backdrop that I ask the question: how did the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attacks contribute to the construction of the “other” particularly in terms of religious othering in Sri Lanka during the period of 2019-2021?

In this essay the ‘other’ constitute Muslims of Sri Lanka who are ethnic and religious minorities. I argue that the pandemic period served as a major ‘site of symbolic contestations’ for the religio-political construction of the ‘other’ marked by practices such as denying religious burial rites for Muslims. I use Jonathan Smith’s third model in ‘Differential equations on constructing the other’ to explain Buddhist and Islamic alterities analyzing the discursive shift in the island’s political and social landscape, the shift in political discourse in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attacks, and the discursive dynamics which underscore tensions between democratic norms, authoritarian tendencies, and public health imperatives in the context of the pandemic. In addition, I construe the COVID-19 pandemic as a ‘site of symbolic contestations’ between different religious and political groups as conceptualized by Talal Asad in “Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam”. The first part of the essay explains the methodology and theoretical framework which provides the definitions for the main terms used in the analysis; the second part applies Smith’s ‘linguistic and intellectual other’ model to the Sri Lankan context; finally, the third part draws conclusions regarding the

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6. Shemara Wettimuny, “Sri Lanka 2019-2020: Extremism, elections and economic uncertainty at the time of COVID-19,” *Asia Maior* 31 (2020): 407.

consequences of religious othering of the Muslim population of Sri Lanka and the broader cultural and societal impact which follows from it.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In a world with a multiplicity of religions and cultures, “othering” is a phenomenon with an inherently ethnocentric or ethnoreligious bias. In Sri Lanka, for example, a nation with a Sinhalese-Buddhist majority where Buddhism is constitutionally protected, it is common to refer to Muslims as “Thambyiya” pejoratively, Tamils as “Koti”, and the Burgher minority as “Thuppahi.”<sup>7</sup> The significance of these terms will be explained in the next section of the paper. For now, it is sufficient to say that these terms refer to out-groups and are thus used to distinguish the in-group from the out-group and establish the social superiority of the former. Smith argues that when such differences are amplified by negative stereotyping, this social differentiation can escalate to the level of violence. In other words,

It emphasizes the communalities of one’s own group and exaggerates the differences of others. Particularly when it endorses violence, it can portray the religious other not as a tolerable alternative, but as a hostile force that can threaten one’s own community.<sup>8</sup>

In this essay, I utilize Smith’s third model (linguistics model) in “Differential Equations on constructing the other” to analyze the religio-political landscape of Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attacks. The three models of the ‘other’ according to Smith are:

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7. Shemara Wettimuny, “The Colonial History of Islamophobic Slurs in Sri Lanka,” *History Workshop*, 2020, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/empire-decolonisation-colonial-history-islamophobia/>; Michael Roberts, “Why Thuppahi,” *Thuppahi’s Blog*, n.d., <https://thuppahis.com/why-thuppahi/>.

8. Mark Juergensmeyer, “Othering in ISIS.” In *Religious Othering Global Dimensions*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer, Kathleen Moore, and Dominic Sachsenmaier (New York: Routledge, 2023), 5.

- (i) The ‘other’ represented metonymically in terms of the presence or absence of one or more cultural traits.
- (ii) The ‘other’ represented topographically in terms of center and periphery.
- (iii) The ‘other’ represented linguistically and/or intellectually in terms of intelligibility.

In the Linguistic and Intellectual model, the other is represented in terms of intellectual capabilities and intelligibility; that is to say, they are presented as deficient in linguistic and cognitive skills in order to justify their marginalization. By doing this, the in-group asserts their intellectual and linguistic superiority by portraying the out-group as the inferior ‘other’ in the social hierarchy. This third model explains ‘othering’ as particularly pernicious, as it dehumanizes the ‘other’ by diminishing the moral significance of their suffering or mistreatment, allowing the in-group to justify violence and discrimination towards the out-group. Smith also uses the model to highlight complacency or indifference to the sufferings of ‘others’:

Difference becomes insignificant, in the strict sense of the term and, therefore, requires no decipherment, no exegetical labor, no hermeneutic projects. It is for the vocal opposite, for ‘us’, to speak for ‘them’. Difference has become in-difference.<sup>9</sup>

Smith uses the example of the indifference that colonial powers evinced towards the suffering of indigenous populations whose lands they colonized when they prioritized their own interests over the well-being and rights of the native inhabitants. Such indifference could also be seen in the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews during the Second World War. Both of these instances provide examples of marginalization of ethnic alterities.

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9. Jonathan Smith, “Differential Equations on Constructing the Other,” In *Relating Religion : Essays in the Study of Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 238–39.

In the Sri Lankan context, which is the focus of this article, I discuss Buddhist and Muslim alterities for which Smith has not provided scholarly definitions. However, Michael Jerryson explores Buddhist othering of Muslims by studying the discursive practices within Buddhist texts and contemporary narratives which constructs Muslims as the ‘other’. He cites examples from the *Kālacakra Tantra* where Buddhist authors identify Muslims as uncivilized barbarians who observe a demonic dharma, cook meat with blood, and consume food in a primitive manner. Muslims are also labelled or linguistically referred to as ‘mleccha’ meaning outsider.<sup>10</sup> These examples demonstrate the different perceptions that in-groups have towards the out-groups.

Smith’s model is also applied by Jerryson and Frydenlund to analyze the ways in which Theravada Buddhists make Muslims the ‘other’ through Buddhist traditions which construct and maintain boundaries between the self and the other, perpetuating notions of superiority and legitimizing violence against perceived outsiders.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Juergensmeyer highlights the Islamic State’s othering of the Western world. ISIS ideologues use derogatory terms like “dahri” (atheist), “mulhid” (nonbeliever), “eilmani” (worldly), “jahil” (ignorant), “aljahil” (clumsy oaf), “iblis” (devils), and “khanazeer” (pigs) to denigrate Westerners, particularly those who are secular or non-religious, in order to portray them as ignorant, morally corrupt, and worthy of disdain or hostility.<sup>12</sup>

In this study, a qualitative approach using concepts borrowed from Asad (1993), Smith (2004) and the Copenhagen School’s approach to securitization (2012) is adopted to analyze religio-political discourse. The focus is on social media discourse and speech acts of the president and government. The Copenhagen school of security studies defines a speech act in the context of securitization as one that contains three main

10. Michael Jerryson, 2023. “Buddhist Constructions of the Muslim Other.” In *Religious Othering Global Dimensions*, eds. Mark Juergensmeyer, Kathleen Moore, and Dominic Sachsenmaier (New York: Routledge, 2023), 41–52.

11. Michael Jerryson and Iselin Frydenlund, “Buddhists, Muslims and the Construction of Difference,” in *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World*, 292.

12. Juergensmeyer, “Othering in ISIS,” 118.

rhetorical criteria: the first is that there is an existential threat, secondly an authority can take exceptional measures to address that threat, and thirdly this authority may deviate from norms and rules to counter the threat.<sup>13</sup> Religio-political discourse is the study of debates and narratives in the complex interplay of religion and politics. Although religio-political discourse is not defined by scholars, Talal Asad explains this interplay of religion and politics by asserting that there are power dynamics in the construction and interpretation of religious meanings.

Asad argues that religious discourses have been shaped by political, economic, and social forces in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Furthermore, he defines genealogies as non-static or objective narratives that are dynamic and contingent on the power relations that shape them. Genealogies are employed to legitimize certain forms of authority, identity and knowledge while marginalizing certain elements of society. Asad also introduces the concept of a 'site of symbolic contestation' in which conflicting interpretations of religious identity, cultural legitimacy, and political authority come into direct confrontation. He uses the example of the protests and violence in the aftermath of the publication of Salman Rushdie's book 'The Satanic Verses' in England as a site of symbolic contestation. The novel's controversial depiction of Islam culminated in hostile debates around identity, freedom of expression, censorship, and religious violence, particularly following Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie. Asad highlights the narrativizations of the Muslim-liberal clash in the UK following the Rushdie affair as a polarization of values among western ideals of free expression, secularism and the convictions of some Muslims who viewed any critique of Islam or the Prophet as justifying violent responses.<sup>14</sup>

Important parallels can be drawn between the controversies and debates surrounding the burning of satanic verses in the United Kingdom and the controversies and debates surrounding the COVID-19 cremations

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13. Rens van Munster, "Securitization," *Oxford Bibliographies* (2012).

14. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 301 - 303.

in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government's decision to cremate the corpses of all those who died from the virus was seen as religious and ethnic discrimination of Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka who were already feeling targeted and marginalized after the Easter Sunday Attacks. Their assertion of identity in demanding religious burial rights in this polarized climate was viewed negatively by those pushing forward the government's agenda. Asad points to a similar polarization when he quotes Sebastian Poulter: "They do not simply ask to be included in the wider political society, they make detailed demands of the state to enable them to live out their lives in a culturally distinctive manner. They want to bury their dead in their own way, to have special times and places set aside for worship."<sup>15</sup> What Asad and Poulter refer to here are how identity assertion of Muslims in secular Britain on religious lines become more prominent and contentious following incidents such as the public burning of Rushdie's book in Bradford in 1998 triggered by its 'blasphemous content'. Similarly in Sri Lanka the debate around COVID-19 cremations which targeted Muslims led to polarized debates on science, religion, limitations of minority rights and the vilification of the Muslim other in Sri Lanka. Social media in particular became a polarized space where the notion of a "site of symbolic contestation" serves as a mode of analysis.

Smith's third model of differential equations provides the analytical framework to trace the shifting narratives and tensions within these online discourses. Smith's third model of differential equations where the 'other' is represented linguistically or intellectually in terms of intelligibility provides a framework to trace how certain actors (radical elements of the Buddhist clergy and Sinhala Buddhist nationalist actors) portrayed Muslims as cognitively deficient in the context of COVID-19 cremation policies by construing Muslims pushing for burial rites as incapable of rational or scientific reasoning, thereby delegitimizing their claims and cultural practices as dangerous. Presidential/governmental speech acts and social media discourses demonstrate the polarizations that public

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15. Asad, 272.

discourse blurred the lines between science and religion - not simply as a clash of ideas but as a strategy to reinforce hierarchies of identity and religious authority. In this way, Smith's linguistic model helps expose how the symbolic contestation over burial rites was embedded in deeper structures of epistemic and political exclusion.

The media sources used in this analysis have been selected with the help of the Colombo-based think tank Verité Research's Media Ownership Monitor.<sup>16</sup> This monitor provides a comprehensive overview of media outlets used by Sri Lankans daily, ranging from those with clearly identifiable ownership and those without. For example, Independent Television Network Limited (ITN) is a state governed television and radio broadcaster, Ada Derana is a privately owned, trilingual news outlet under Derana Macro Entertainment, News First is a privately owned multi-platform service under the Capital Maharaja Organisation Limited, and Lanka C News, whose ownership is less transparent, is widely reported to be affiliated with National Freedom Front leader Wimal Weerawansa. Data on LankaWeb News Forum is not available. Despite some of these sources such as Lanka C News and LankaWeb having faced government blockage in 2015 over concerns of publishing incorrect information and damaging the President's reputation, they remain influential platforms where public discourse is actively shared and engaged with. Unlike in countries such as Canada, where the Online News Act has restricted news from being shared on Meta platforms, Sri Lanka has no such mechanism.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, both authentic actors and bots could be used to share content to

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16. Verité Research, "Independent Television Network (ITN)?" *Media Ownership Monitor Sri Lanka*, 2018, <https://sri-lanka.mom-gmr.org/en/media/detail/outlet/independent-television-network-itn/>; "Ada Derana?" Media Ownership Monitor Sri Lanka, 2018, <https://sri-lanka.mom-gmr.org/en/media/detail/outlet/ada-derana/> ; "Lanka C News?" Media Ownership Monitor Sri Lanka, 2018, <https://sri-lanka.mom-gmr.org/en/media/detail/outlet/lanka-c-news/> ; "News First?" Media Ownership Monitor Sri Lanka, 2018, <https://sri-lanka.mom-gmr.org/en/media/detail/outlet/news-1st/>.

17. Jessica Mundie, "Canadians Will No Longer Have Access to News Content on Facebook and Instagram, Meta Says," *CBC*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/online-news-act-meta-facebook-1.6885634>.

the 15 million Facebook users across the country.<sup>18</sup>

The Facebook posts in the analysis were manually selected after a systematic data cleaning process to ensure that the data used in the study accurately reflects genuine public perceptions (Andreotta et al. 2019).<sup>19</sup> Social media, particularly Facebook, is a rich source of unmediated public discourse where individuals express their interpretations, emotions, and judgments about events as they unfold. When assessing the process of othering, these posts are critical because they reveal how users both propagate and contest narratives that construct in-groups and out-groups. The manually curated sample, therefore, allows for an in-depth analysis of the specific language, and sentiment used in articulating ‘othering’ in relation to the pandemic governance and its religious-political implications. Content generated by duplicate posts, spam, and bots have been filtered to reflect only genuine human interactions using filtering techniques based on language and thematic relevance in Sinhala and English. This ensures that the analysis focuses on content that is contextually and semantically relevant to the research question. The posts have also been selected using certain engagement techniques such as likes, shares and comments to reduce the impact of certain narratives which may indicate a significant level of public resonance. Finally, videos, speeches and reports of officials such as presidential addresses have been collated through official sources from the President’s Media Division and Ministry of External Affairs. Other sources of discourse analysis include video footage of a hate preaching monk from People’s Rights Group Sri Lanka, a UK-based advocacy and lobbying organization addressing human rights violations including hate speech.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Harshi Alwis, “Facebook Reaches 15 Million Users in Sri Lanka,” *Daily Mirror*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/infographics/Facebook-reaches-15-million-users-in-Sri-Lanka/193301513>.

19. Matthew Andreotta, Robertus Nugroho, Mark J. Hurlstone, Fabio Boschetti, Simon Farrell, Iain Walker, and Cecile Paris. “Analyzing Social Media Data: A Mixed-Methods Framework Combining Computational and Qualitative Text Analysis.” *Behavior Research Methods* 51, n. 4 (2019): 1766–81.

20. “People’s Rights Group,” 2025, <https://www.prgsrilanka.org/>.

### Analysis : religio-political discourse surrounding the COVID49 crisis

The defeat of the LTTE in 2009 marked the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka and ushered in a new brand of politics, giving rise to a Sinhala-Buddhist ultra-nationalism perpetuated by the Rajapaksa political dynasty. The victory over the LTTE gained Mahinda Rajapaksa (the executive president at the time) immense popularity among the masses. During the war, his younger brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa served as the defense secretary and was hailed by Rajapaksa as his right-hand man. The Rajapaksas' popular appeal dwindled by 2012 when Mahinda Rajapaksa leadership was electorally challenged by the former commander of the army, General Sarath Fonseka. During Rajapaksa's second term as president, his popularity was already challenged due to high levels of corruption and nepotism in his government. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was allegedly involved in enforced disappearances and stifling of dissent in the country.<sup>21</sup> The Rajapaksa family's politics were based on patronage and promotion national unity. The separatist movement and the recognition of the political power of the Tamil minority were thus excluded from consideration. The Rajapaksa's promoted the idea that, so long as they are in power, the country would be free of terrorism and threats to national security. When the Easter Sunday Attacks occurred in Sri Lanka in 2019, it was an opportune moment for the Rajapaksas to make a comeback into politics by promoting their brand. Three of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's speeches exemplify this meta-narrative.

The first example is the swearing-in speech of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as the eighth president of Sri Lanka on November 18, 2019 (translated from Sinhala): "I pledge to uphold the constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and ensure that there will be no support, whether direct or indirect, for the creation of a separate state within Sri Lanka or

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21. Salimah Shivji, "'We Must Not Lose Hope': Activists, Victims Seek War Crimes Charges against Ex-Sri Lankan President," *CBC*, August 26, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/sri-lanka-gotabhaya-rajapaksa-war-crimes-1.6561580>.

abroad through funding, sponsorship, or encouragement.”<sup>22</sup>

The second example is drawn from the President’s speech at the 73<sup>rd</sup> Independence Day celebrations in Sri Lanka on February 4th 2021:

More than 6.9 million people elected me as President to provide the leadership needed to reestablish national security... I am a Sinhala Buddhist leader and I will never hesitate to state so. I govern this country in accordance with Buddhist teachings. Within the Buddhist philosophic tradition of peaceful coexistence which gives due respect to all religions and ethnicities, every person in this country irrespective of his or her ethnic or religious identification has the right to enjoy the freedom as equals under the nation’s legal framework. Traitorous elements always band together and seek to marshal domestic and foreign forces against the leadership that upholds indigenous way of life and country’s sovereignty.<sup>23</sup>

The third example is an excerpt from the President’s address at the at 76th UN General Assembly – New York, September 22, 2021:

The democratic tradition is an integral part of our way of life, my election in 2019 and the parliamentary elections of 2020 saw Sri Lankan voters grant an emphatic mandate to my government to build a prosperous and stable country and uphold national security and sovereignty. In 2019, Sri Lanka experienced the devastation brought by extremist religious terrorists in the Easter Sunday Attacks. Before that, until 2009, it had suffered from a separatist terrorist war for 30 years. Terrorism is a global challenge that requires international cooperation especially intelligence sharing if it is to be overcome...my government is committed to ensure that such violence never takes place in Sri Lanka ever again.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (Ada Derana), “Gotabhaya Rajapaksa takes oaths as President,” *Youtube*, November 18, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4eHQ\\_ChW7o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4eHQ_ChW7o). Translated by author.

23. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, “Full Text of the Speech Made by His Excellency President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa on 73rd Independence Day – February 4, 2021,” Presented at the Presidential Secretariat, Colombo, <https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2021/02/04/full-text-of-the-speech-made-by-his-excellency-president-gotabhaya-rajapaksa-on-73rd-independence-day-february-4-2021/>

24. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, “Speech of President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa at 76th UN General Assembly – New York, September 22, 2021,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs- Sri Lanka, New York, February 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yttqpTMkvQ&t=1s>.

In the above speeches, a prominent meta-narrative emerges that emphasizes Sri Lanka's identity as a Sinhala Buddhist nation and that advocates for the necessity of a Sinhalese Buddhist leader to safeguard this status. Gotabhaya's self-identification as a Sinhala-Buddhist leader during his swearing-in speech and his pledge to use Buddhist teachings to govern the country positions Buddhism as a central pillar of national identity and governance. Moreover, the rhetoric of the victory over the war, references made to democracy, and the allusion to a public mandate to guarantee national security is emphasized in all three speeches. This could be interpreted as a discursive strategy to mobilize support among segments of the population who strongly identify with Sinhala Buddhist identity.<sup>25</sup> He refers to 'traitorous elements' both foreign and local that band together against his leadership in order to pinpoint those who seek to prosecute him for alleged war crimes that occurred during the civil war – this includes an exhaustive list political dissenters. While the president does not explicitly discriminate against any one religion or go on to specify who these traitorous elements are, he emphasizes the superiority of Buddhism which, by default, relegates other religions to the margins. Notably, at the UN General Assembly, he mentions that the Easter Sunday Attacks were perpetrated by "extremist religious terrorists." He does not mention that the suicide bombers involved in the attacks were Muslims but colors the religious undertones of the event.

During the period in which he gave these three speeches, Muslims were facing backlash, stigmatization and acute marginalization in Sri Lanka. Firstly, Muslims were accused of being non-compliant to COVID-19 mobility restrictions; secondly, they were blamed for spreading the virus; thirdly, as a consequence, discrimination against Muslims culminated in the enforced cremations of all victims of the virus. Traditional Islamic funeral rites for the dead could not be observed for victims of the Corona Virus. Prior to COVID-19, Sri Lanka's ethnic relations, particularly those

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25. Sinhala-Buddhists constitute roughly 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population.

among the Sinhala-Buddhists and Muslims were already fractured. Before the Easter Sunday Attacks perpetrated by radical Muslims, there were numerous incidents of religious violence involving different groups and chiefly among them were the extremist Sinhala-Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS).<sup>26</sup> This Buddhist mob of militant monks are headed by radical monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero. Weerawardhana points out that prominent politicians in Sri Lanka had alleged that the BBS was supported financially by a secret national defense budget allocation under the Mahinda Rajapaksa government.<sup>27</sup>

26. Following the end of the civil war in 2009, there were sporadic instances of violence of varying intensity. In 2013 the Grandpass incident marked an acute episode characterized by widespread physical assaults and significant property destruction, which was followed in 2014 by the Aluthgama riots. Despite the democratic transition in January 2015, which saw a reduction in such high-intensity outbreaks, a persistent pattern of chronic violence has continued, defined by low-intensity attacks such as hate campaigns, threats, intimidation, and minor property damage against Muslim communities (Gehan Gunatillake, *The Chronic and the Acute: Post-War Religious Violence in Sri Lanka* Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies & Equitas, 2015, 3334 ; Gunatillake, *The Chronic and the Entrenched: Ethno-Religious Violence in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies & Equitas, 2018): 28–29. Some of the instigating actors for a variety of these violences were the Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balakaya. The anti-muslim riots of 2018 were of a high intensity. Authors writing on the topic of Buddhist radicals, particularly using the example of the BBS including Hertzberg (2018), Orjuela (2019) and Weerawardhana (2017) are in agreement that the BBS have actively targeted Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka with their campaign against halal certifications, inter-faith marriages, and contestations over sacred sites especially drawing on the issue of Kuragala. The Kuragala sacred site, in close proximity to Balangoda town, holds historical and religious significance for both Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. While Buddhists view it as a sacred Buddhist monastic site, Muslims claim it as important to the Islamic faith, citing archaeological evidence of a Sufi saint's meditation there. The issue gained political traction when Bodu Bala Sena leader Gnanasara Thero invoked communal tensions by urging Buddhists to "celebrate Vesak" at Kuragala, referencing the 1915 Gampola religious riots. The riots of 1915 originated in the town of Gampola in the Central Province of Sri Lanka when a Muslim provocation during a Buddhist procession on Vesak Day turned violent - spreading to 116 other locations in Sri Lanka. During the riots, around 25 Muslims were murdered, and 412 persons were arrested by the British authorities (Michael Hertzberg, "The Audience and the Spectacle: Bodu Bala Sena and the Controversy of Buddhist Political Activism in Sri Lanka," In *Rhetorical Audience Studies and Reception of Rhetoric - Exploring Audiences Empirically* (Bergen: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 248.

27. Chamindra Weerawardhana, "Paradigms of [In]Tolerance? On Sri Lanka's Bodu Bala Sena, #prezpolisl2015, and Transformative Dynamics of Lived Religion," in *Lived*

Immediately after the election of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as the president of Sri Lanka, Gnanasara in a speech stated (translated from Sinhala):

With the main Sinhala majority, by highlighting this patriotic voice and using at least a little of the minority votes, this election victory is a happy reason for us. Next, we must be ready to build trust with those minorities who fill our heads with myths. Now it is like the father came home. In the past years, the nation was like orphaned children without a father... Now we need to clear the parliament, we will work until the general elections, and we are planning to disperse the BBS after the elections.<sup>28</sup>

Gnanasara's speech above highlights the capacity of the BBS to persuade the Sinhala-Buddhist majority that the election of the Rajapaksas was the right and legitimate decision of the people. His speech also insinuates that the BBS has no 'work' to do after the general elections of 2020, implying that their main work was to guarantee Gotabhaya's victory. Furthermore, Gnanasara's references to 'myths' and the minorities of Sri Lanka is an example of a chronic form of 'othering' and the entrenchment of Buddhism within patronage and statesmanship.

The hate-mongering monk Ampitiye Sumana Thero is another example of othering of ethnic minorities. In a viral video, he accuses a Tamil man of working for the LTTE and of obtaining funds from the Tamil diaspora (the so-called traitorous elements in Gotabhaya's terms) using pejorative terms such as 'Kotiya'.<sup>29</sup> In this video, the monk verbally harasses Tamil Catholics for distributing leaflets to celebrate Christmas in Batticaloa, a multiethnic and multireligious district comprising Tamils, Buddhists and Muslims. He accuses the Catholic priest of proselytizing in Buddhist areas. The use of pejorative terms such as 'Thambya', a

*Religion and the Politics of (In)Tolerance* (Bergen: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 26.

28. Gala Goda Aththe Gnanasara, මහ මැතිවරණයන් පසු බෙංුදු බල සරේනා සංචිතානය විසුරුවා භැරරේ. *ITN News- Sri Lanka*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PY3HShznf4>. Translated by author.

29. 'Kotiya' means 'tiger' and is discriminatory term for Tamil minorities. PRG Sri Lanka, "The Hate Monk Harsassing a Catholic Group in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka," December 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhfSB1WnaYY>.

slur against Muslim minorities meaning brother in Tamil, or Thuppari, used against Sri Lankans of Portuguese mixed descent, are not new in Sri Lanka and are commonly used during arguments or skirmishes. The example of Ampitiye Sumana Thero highlights that incidents of Buddhist discrimination towards religious minorities have continued after the Easter Sunday Attacks. This incident, which took place in the Batticaloa district where a suicide bomber killed 28 people at the Zion Church, demonstrates that vitriolic attacks in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday Attacks re-animated existing prejudices against minorities- including Tamils. This incident is significant because it conflates Tamil Catholics with terrorism reinforcing longstanding prejudices under the pretext of protecting national security.

The support of Buddhist clergy was also mobilized to legitimize and enforce the Sri Lankan government's decision to mandate the cremation of COVID-19 victims. To provide a context to this policy, the government had taken the decision to cremate based on recommendations from a technical committee. According to professor Meththika Vithanage, the burial of dead bodies could contaminate groundwater with the COVID-19 virus. The technical committee's basis for claiming that corpses could contaminate groundwater has not been made public, leaving the rationale unclear. The Muslims were directly affected by this policy, as they could not observe essential Islamic funeral rites: washing the corpse, shrouding, prayer and burial.<sup>30</sup> In response to growing concerns from civil society organizations, Muslim communities, and international organizations, a new expert committee led by Professor Jennifer Perera, was appointed, recommending a revised policy which allowed both cremation and burial with appropriate safety measures. Their findings indicated that the risk of waterborne transmission from burial is minimal and manageable with proper precautions, such as using non-biodegradable body bags which could minimize water contamination.<sup>31</sup>

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30. Althaf Marsoof, "The Disposal of COVID-19 Dead Bodies: Impact of Sri Lanka's Response on Fundamental Rights," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 13, no.3 (2021): 673.

31. Marsoof, 682.

Buddhist monks affiliated with the Inter-Religious Subcommittee of the Sri Lanka Amarapura and Ramanna Samagri Maha Sangha Sabha actively opposed the relaxation of the cremation policy. The monks petitioned the president and staged a protest outside the Presidential Secretariat, arguing that allowing religious burials endangered public health. During the protest, in media interviews, they condemned Justice Minister Ali Sabry (the sole Muslim cabinet member) labeling him “an extremist in disguise” and insisted that the president should govern in line with the majority that voted him into power.<sup>32</sup> According to the monks, permission for burials, framed as a concession to “other groups,” betrayed the nation’s commitment to public health and safety. This rhetoric implicitly stigmatized the minority by casting their religious practices as a public health threat. Such rhetoric coming from the Buddhist clergy exemplifies the influence of Buddhist religious institutions and their role in shaping public policy.

The Sri Lankan government’s management of the burial regulations during the pandemic can be productively analyzed through the prism of Smith’s third model of othering. According to this model, a religious group coming forward to denounce the religious practices of another religious group also shows their complacency and indifference. This was especially the case when government officials, despite failing to legally acquire the parents’ consent, pushed for the cremation of a 20-day old baby who had died of the virus. The hospital failed to notify the parents of the baby’s death, and when they sought a PCR test at a private hospital, they were refused and coerced into signing a waiver for cremation. Despite questioning the rush to cremate, the hospital provided no explanation, leaving the parents distressed and feeling disregarded.<sup>33</sup>

Such ‘indifference’ was also widely propagated on social media

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32. Newsfirst Sri Lanka, “Monks protest against allowing burials in Sri Lanka,” December 28, 2020, <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/12/28/protest-in-colombo-against-burial-of-covid-dead>.

33. Muhammad Saekul Mujahidin, “Extremism and Islamophobia Against the Muslim Minority in Sri Lanka,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 40, no. 1–2 (July 3, 2023), 230–31.

during the pandemic. A Facebook post in Sinhala deliberately promoted the ‘scientific basis’ for the cremations, stating that ‘scientific evidence’ must be prioritized over religious beliefs and emotions; it garnered over 600 likes, 300+ shares and 500+ comments.<sup>34</sup> Another post shared by a Muslim woman presented an emotional and logical appeal that Muslims do not keep their corpses for long periods and are immediately buried, thus non-threatening to health security.<sup>35</sup> She poses the question: “what have we done wrong to be burnt?” These posts exemplify the pandemic cremation policy as a site of symbolic contestations in Asad’s terms. While Muslims attempt to appeal to common sense and shared understandings, stating that religious burial rites should take precedence over unsubstantiated scientific claims, other factions in society, such as radical Buddhists, argue otherwise. Muslims actively cautioned their own community to observe the quarantine and restricted movement rules in place to prevent the spread of the virus. The post is on the guidelines issued by the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) regarding congressional prayers at Masjids posted on their official website.<sup>36</sup>

34. Chameen Jayamal Mirisse, ‘නැවත වතාවක් කතිකාවක් ඇති වි තිබනෙනවා, කොළඹේ 19 න් මියයන මූස්ලිම් ජාතිකයන්ගේ තුමදාන අසිනිය පිළිගන්නලු,’ Facebook, December 22, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/804276106323782/permalink/3627165367368161/>. Translated by the author. (See appendix figure 1). This is a post from a genuine user and was shared in a Facebook group titled “Genuis Club.” This group has 153.2K members with a diverse and active audience that engages with a wide range of opinions and current events. Content is shared daily generating conversations around the posts from active users. This is an example of an online forum where everyday discourses are openly expressed and shared. This type of platform demonstrates popular narratives and the dynamics of online engagement to understand how perceptions are constructed and disseminated among the public.

35. Naleefa Abdul Wadood, ‘කොළඹේ 19,’ Facebook, December 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/naleefa.abdulwadood/posts/2816045592048762>. Translated by the author. (See appendix figure 2). This is a post from an authentic user, verified by the author as a senior lecturer in sociology at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka. She had made this post public. As a prominent Muslim figure in her locality, those who engaged with her from her own Facebook account were in agreement with her sentiments, and the engagements were respectful.

36. All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, ‘Statement on COVID-19,’ Facebook, March 16, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ACJU.Official/posts/1294691024063005>. (See appendix figure 3)

Another pernicious issue regarding the treatment of Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic was the dissemination of misinformation that claimed that Muslims in the country were spreading COVID-19. The Hindustan Times reports that four Sri Lankans participated in the Tablighi Jamaat congregation in Nizamuddin, Delhi between March 13-15 in 2020.<sup>37</sup> LankaWeb reports that 34 Sri Lankans participated in the same congregation.<sup>38</sup> The discourse surrounding the Tablighi Jamaat spreading the virus in South Asia, Southeast Asia, India and Sri Lanka was pejoratively circulated on social media. Take, for example, this excerpt from the LankaC news website posted by an anonymous Facebook account under the name “truth is bitter and bitter is the truth”:

Tablighi Jamaat spreads corona in bulk from Malaysia to Thailand and Thailand to Pakistan and now India... Tablighi Jamaat, a non-political global Sunni Islamic evangelical movement of Indian origin, has emerged as the “main virus carrier” of the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia and is said to have been the source of hundreds of coronavirus cases in the region through its membership.<sup>39</sup>

The same anonymous account in another post states:

An investigation conducted by the intelligence agencies revealed that the 10 patients found in Puttalam who contracted the Covid virus had attended the Tablighi Jamaat religious conference held in Indonesia and had returned to Sri Lanka on the 17th. It has been confirmed that three groups have gone to Indonesia and returned to Sri Lanka to

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37. Leena Dhankhar, “Coronavirus: Four from Sri Lanka Who Attended Tablighi Jamat Gathering Test Positive in Haryana’s Nuh,” *The Hindustan Times*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/gurugram/coronavirus-four-from-sri-lanka-who-attended-tablighi-jamat-gathering-test-positive-in-haryana-s-nuh/story-wP89qPQiiO4aLlWQZeV5SJ.html>.

38. Dilrook Kannangara, “Tablighi Jamaat Linked to One Third of Indian and a Number of Sri Lankan COVID-19 Cases,” *LankaWeb*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2020/04/05/tablighi-jamaat-linked-to-one-third-of-indian-and-a-number-of-sri-lankan-covid-19-cases/comment-page-1/>.

39. ඇත්ත තින්නකි තින්නකි ඇත්ත, ‘කබුලික් ජමාත් කොළ වගයනේ කොරෝනා පුදුවියි,’ Facebook, April 2, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=140874197564387&id=100049254215035](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=140874197564387&id=100049254215035). Translated by author. (See appendix figure 4).

participate in this religious conference and 36 people who came with them are missing as of now (02.04.2020).<sup>40</sup>

Another post from the same public group further amplifies narrative.<sup>41</sup> Although it is difficult to determine the exact reach of these posts in the group and whether the followers are bots or not, the engagement with the posts reflect the genuine sentiments of members of the Sri Lankan population. These Facebook posts exemplify the effect of such unverified information on the perception of people who experienced these events in real-time. This Facebook group hosts 8000 accounts under the name of the Sri Lanka People's Front. The group carries the following description:

After the brutal war, the Rajapaksa regime led the country forward on the path of development through a systematic long-term program under the Mahinda Chintana program and Mahinda Chintana vision to build the country. The opinion of the people was that with the harmony of Mahinda's power, Basil's brain and Gotabaya's discipline, our country is moving towards the highest position in the world. Despite the so-called good governance Ranil-Chandrika-Sirisena seizing power through a conspiracy that used foreign money to destroy it, the country has been devastated by destruction in these two and a half years. Therefore, the opportunity has come to topple this current so-called disorganized regime of good governance. Accordingly, it is the duty of all of us to restore Rajapaksa harmony to power.<sup>42</sup>

40. ඇත්ත තින්තයි තින්තයි ඇත්ත, 'ර්යලේ දූල්ලියලේ වාර්තා වූ රෝගීන් 356 දෙනාගනේ 325 ක් තබේ එක් ජමාත් සාමාජිකයින් බව ඉන්දිය රජය නිවේදනය කරයි,' Facebook, April 14, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=122367156081758&id=100049254215035](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=122367156081758&id=100049254215035). Translated by author. (See appendix figure 5)

41. Jayantha Wickramasuriya, 'මැලලේ සියාවලේ සිට නායිලන්තයටන් නායිලන්තයලේ සිට පක්ෂීනානයටන් දැන් ඉන්දියාවන් තබේ එකතු වීම හරහා කොරෝනා වෙරෙසය පැනුරුවා ඇත,' Facebook, April 1, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/101657643787677/permalink/558152131471557/>. Translated by author. (See appendix figure 6) This post is an example of a group administrator sharing unverified information from online news sources in a deliberate attempt to create conversation around this subject.

42. podujana peramune apy 2030 France, 'About this group,' Facebook, June 17, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/101657643787677/about>. Translated by author. (See appendix figure 7). In this Facebook group, it is difficult to determine whether certain accounts are operated by authentic Facebook users or bots.

The analysis of the social media posts and the news articles through the lens of Smith's third model suggests that 'the othering' of Muslims have indeed been discursively constructed as intellectually inferior - meaning that they are unable to understand and comply with health guidelines. The discourse surrounding the Tablighi Jamaat congregation and its alleged role in spreading the virus may contain some truth at the level of the facts invoked, but it also promulgated misinformation. For example, there are contradictory reports on the number of Sri Lankans that participated in the congregations in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

The narratives about the Tablighi Jamaat spreading the virus in Sri Lanka itself is confounding and fear mongering. It is vitriolic rhetoric that suggests the virus could spread among Muslims in Sri Lanka who could in turn infect 'others'. Such forms of misinformation exacerbate societal biases that exist within Sri Lanka; they look to scapegoat specific religious or ethnic groups in order to achieve political objectives. Abayasekara explains this as "name blaming" and "a conflation of race and disease" and cites the example of Muslims who were quarantined for COVID-19 from the Beruwela town of the Kalutara district in Sri Lanka.<sup>43</sup> They were labelled as 'Beruwela people', and a popular TV presenter from Sri Lanka mentioned that these people have deprived Sri Lanka of enjoying the Sinhala New Year.<sup>44</sup> The social media group that spread the Tablighi Jamaat narrative posed as supporters of the ruling party, further underscoring the presence of political undercurrents within this conflict. The post from the anonymous account does not only portray Muslims as carriers of the virus but as a major security threat being investigated by the intelligence services.

The involvement of the military intelligence in the COVID-19

43. Shalini Abayasekara, "Dead Matter: COVID-19 and the Banning of Burials in Sri Lanka," in *Envisioning Embodiment in the Health Humanities: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literature, Culture, and Media*, eds. Jodi Cressman, Lisa DeTora, Jeannie Ludlow, and Nora Martin Peterson (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 186-87.

44. Abayasekara, 186-87.

pandemic therefore also warrants nuanced scrutiny. With the third wave of COVID-19 and the rapid rise of cases, the president declared an island wide curfew from 20-23 March 2020<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the Gazette Extraordinary declared COVID-19 a quarantinable disease.<sup>46</sup> Sri Lanka utilized an intelligence driven detection, isolation and tracing system with the involvement of Public Health Officials, State Intelligence Service, Directorate of Military Intelligence and Police Special Branch. The COVID-19 National Task Force appointed by the president in Sri Lanka was headed by the commander of the army along with other senior military officials and members of the Epidemiology Unit in Sri Lanka. The role of the military in contract tracing, running quarantine facilities, and even conducting media briefings amplified the image of the president domestically. All health-related public warnings and advisories were issued by the President's Media division. Such activities were not out of the ordinary for Sri Lanka, as the type of emergency that was created with curfews, emergency regulations, police check points, and the omnipresence of uniformed men were similar to the manner in which Sri Lankans lived at the height of the civil war. These were symbolic of the kind of highly securitized and military-focused climate, with the military taking credit for saving the nation under the leadership of Rajapaksa.

Gotabhaya's utilization of the military also stems from his own background as a military man and a former secretary of defense. Under his administration, the military's involvement in public policy matters labeled as 'national security' became inevitable; the backlash it provoked was also predictable. Alan Keenan of the International Crisis Group points out that the government of Sri Lanka during the initial phase of the

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45. President's Media Division, "Island-Wide Curfew Imposed," *Presidential Secretariat*, 2020, <https://www.presidentsoffice.gov.lk/index.php/2020/03/20/island-wide-curfew-imposed/>.

46. "Q and A on Regulations Issued under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance & How This Impacts the COVID-19 Response in Sri Lanka," *Centre for Policy Alternatives*, 2020, <https://www.cpalanka.org/q-and-a-on-regulations-issued-under-the-quarantine-and-prevention-of-diseases-ordinance-how-this-impacts-the-covid-19-response-in-sri-lanka/>

pandemic was ruling without parliamentary oversight and with “serious legal anomalies.”<sup>47</sup> The legal validity of the emergency measures such as curfews and appointment of ad hoc task forces were considered extra-judicial. One of the major concerns was the large policy role granted to the military through regulations.<sup>48</sup> For example, on March 25, 2020, the Gazette Extraordinary designated the director general of Health Services as the ‘proper authority’ in respect of pandemic governance in the whole country. However, this regulation did not state that such powers could be delegated to the acting Inspector General of Police (IGP) (who gave orders to conduct contact tracing alongside the military intelligence). Other questions arose as to whether the quarantine process fell under the military’s purview.

The above discussion does not downplay or discredit the role of the military and intelligence services in pandemic governance. Intelligence agencies have played a major role in pandemic preparedness and policy such as in the US and Israel. In the US for example, there is a US biological defense program with different analytical and protection units including the Department of Homeland Security’s Chemical and Biological Defense Division, Office of Preparedness and Response of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Disease Intelligence Program of the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) Directorate of Science and Technology. They help monitor and forecast outbreaks and provide disease intelligence data for policymakers.<sup>49</sup> In Israel, the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID), the Israeli Security Agency (ISA), and Mossad were involved in the pandemic management. Prime Minister Netanyahu also declared a state of emergency in Israel in the fight against COVID-19. This does raise questions about military encroachment into

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47. Alan Keenan, “Sri Lanka’s Other COVID-19 Crisis: Is Parliamentary Democracy at Risk?” *International Crisis Group*, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lankas-other-covid-19-crisis-parliamentary-democracy-risk>.

48. Keenan, “Sri Lanka’s Other COVID-19 Crisis.”

49. Ana Maria Lankford, Derrick Storzieri, and Joseph Fitsanakis. “Spies and the Virus: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Intelligence Communication in the United States.” *Frontiers in Communication* 5 (2020): 3.

civilian life and non-security related national threats and interrogates the balance between civil and military matters.<sup>50</sup> In Sri Lanka, neither the intelligence community nor the government actively partook in correcting public perceptions regarding the narratives about the Tablighi Jamaat and Muslims spreading the virus. Such narratives circulated unchecked by the very authorities that could have intervened to prevent further deterioration of societal relations. The government's indifference to the negative perception of Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic representative of their plight the aftermath of the Easter Attacks – a time when the whole world was facing the threat of the virus.

## Conclusion

The politicization of religious identity and nationalism by the Rajapaksa administration and the stigmatization and marginalization of Muslims coupled with the militarization of pandemic governance were sites of symbolic contestations that illustrate the complexity of religio-political discourse surrounding the COVID-19 crisis in Sri Lanka. The meta-narrative constructed by the Rajapaksa regime emphasizes Sri Lanka's identity as a Sinhala-Buddhist nation and promotes the necessity of a Sinhala Buddhist leader to safeguard this status. Through the analysis of political speeches and social media discourse, it can be seen that figures like Gotabhaya Rajapaksa position themselves as defenders of national security and sovereignty, framing their leadership as indispensable for maintaining stability in the face of perceived security threats. In the process of dispersing this meta-narrative, the Rajapaksa-led government also tended to marginalize and scapegoat religious minorities, particularly Muslims, who are portrayed as a threat to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity and the security of the nation. The stigmatization of Muslims is evident in the discourse surrounding the Tablighi Jamaat congregation and the

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50. Ephraime Kahana, "Intelligence Against COVID-19: Israeli Case Study." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 34, no.2 (2020): 259–266.

subsequent accusation of Muslims spreading the COVID-19 virus. This stigmatization culminated in the policy of mandatory cremation for virus victims, in direct violation of Islamic burial practices. The COVID-19 pandemic thus becomes a site of symbolic contestation, where religious and political actors vie for control over narratives and policies that shape public perceptions and responses. Muslims are constructed as the “other”; Muslims are depicted as intellectually inferior and blamed for the spread of the virus, thus perpetuating harmful stereotypes and exacerbating existing tensions within Sri Lankan society. Furthermore, the involvement of the military and intelligence services in pandemic governance raises concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and civil liberties, as emergency measures are implemented without proper oversight and transparency. The militarization of public health responses reinforces the dominance of the ruling regime and exacerbates the marginalization of religious minorities who are disproportionately affected by discriminatory policies and practices. In the post war era, after the defeat of the LTTE, a pattern of marginalization and scapegoating of Muslims as a new threat against national security has emerged. The Easter Sunday Attacks were therefore an opportune moment to entrench Muslims as the ‘new security threat’ of Sri Lanka. Such constructions serve to reinforce the hegemony of the ruling regime (particularly the Rajapakssas) and perpetuate divisions within Sri Lanka – certainly a dangerous trend.

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## Appendix

Figure 1

Chameen Jayamal Mirisse's Post

Figure 2

Figure 3

All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama - ACJU's Post

All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama - ACJU •  
March 16, 2020

<https://acju.lk/.../1858-guidelines-given-by-acju...>  
#ACJU\_Media #IKA #corona\_virus



An extract from the statement issued by  
ACJU on 15.03.2020 with regard to

## COVID -19

Refrain from all gatherings including performing  
Jumu'ah, 05 times congregational prayers at  
Masjid and public locations.

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Azan should be called out at the prescribed times  
at the Masjid. At the end of Azan the following  
should be pronounced "Sallu Fee Rihaalikum"  
(Offer prayers at your respective premises)  
(Sahih Muslim – 697).

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The Imam and the Muazzin of the Masjid shall  
offer their prayers congregationally at their  
respective Masjids.

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Obligatory prayers should be offered at the  
residences. Special attention should be given to  
the offering of Sunnah prayers, Tahajjud, Dhuha,  
charity, voluntary fasts and other voluntary acts of  
worship. Extra effort should be made  
to abstain from sins.

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Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6



Figure 7



Group by Jayantha Wickramasuriya

**podujana peramune apy 2030 France**

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History Group created on 17 June 2017. Name last changed on 8 December 2021. See more

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Ven Pilapitiye and 9 other members are admins. Moditha and 2 other members are moderators.