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Role of the National *Shūrā* Council (NSC) in establishing religious coexistence in Sri Lanka

MR Fathima Afra*
Thameem Ushama**

Abstract

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural country. The Buddhists form the ethnic majority group, while Hindus, Muslims, and Christians are minority groups. The records show that Muslims have a long history of peaceful coexistence with other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. However, after the civil war ended in 2009, hostilities against Muslim groups increased. Islamic organisations in Sri Lanka are accused of promoting religious extremism and threatening religious harmony. Following the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, Muslim and Islamic organisations were suspended. In light of these recent events, this research focuses on the role of the National Shoorā Council in fostering religious coexistence in Sri Lanka and tries to identify the existing challenges. This is a qualitative study that relies on primary and secondary data. Interviews were conducted with the National Shūrā Council representatives for primary data collection.

Keywords: Religious Coexistence, National Shūrā Council, Islamic Organization, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

The National Shoorā Council is an advisory entity consisting of multiple Muslim organisations and people. Its establishment aims to proactively tackle the existing difficulties encountered by the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Decisions and opinions adopted by the National Shoorā Council (NSC) are the result of a comprehensive process of consultation and deliberation among its members and pertinent stakeholders. The National Shoorā Council is a collective agreement among various Muslim organisations, movements, notable individuals, and regional

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representatives in Sri Lanka. Their actions and decisions are influenced by the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah while adhering to the legal framework of Sri Lanka.¹

Additionally, the National Shura Council (NSC) is an autonomous entity dedicated to advancing consultation, collaboration, and coordination among the Muslim populace, both within the Muslim community itself and in conjunction with other communities in Sri Lanka. Its primary objective is to serve the interests of Allah. The organisation in question is a comprehensive and inclusive entity comprising individuals from many social and cultural origins within the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. It aims to represent and include the wide range of perspectives, practices, and ideologies prevalent among its members on a national scale. The governing body in question will derive its policies and decisions from the principle of *shura*, which entails seeking consensus and striving to achieve the highest feasible level of collective agreement. The entity in question is an officially established organisation that operates under a framework of representation and mechanisms for ensuring responsibility. The entity above aims to leverage the expertise and specialised abilities of individuals, as well as the collective capabilities of organised entities, in order to effectively address the significant problems involved in advocating for and defending the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

The entity, as mentioned earlier, aims to leverage the expertise and specialised abilities of people, as well as the collective capabilities of organised groups, in order to effectively address the significant obstacles associated with advocating for and defending the rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

The NSC is an independent collective entity that promotes conversation, cooperation, and coordination across all ethnicities in Sri Lanka. It represents all Muslim groups from all social and cultural backgrounds, schools of thought, and practices. The Arabic term *shūrā* in its name is intentional, as the word means 'mutual consultation' and refers to the democratic process of exchanging ideas and discussion before decision-making.

Buddhist national organisations, including Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), had emerged and begun to organise radical anti-Muslim campaigns, such as the anti-halal problem, the Muslim female dress code, and attacks on

¹ NSC, "About Us-NSC," n.d., <https://nationalshoora.org/about-us/>.

religious worship venues. As All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) could not stand alone to face BBS's charges and was subjected to widespread criticism from the Muslim community, it was decided to establish NSC to represent Muslim interests in Sri Lanka better. Also, it was believed that religious scholarship alone could not offer the right approach to prevent further conflicts. Therefore, it is a collaborative body that represents Muslim scholars, thinkers, civil organisations, and Islamic revivalist movements in a united front.

Following the formation of the NSC, a subcommittee was formed to develop a strategic approach to focus on the current situation and overcome the present challenges, considering the precarious situation of the Muslim minority community confronted with an increasingly aggressive and militant Buddhist movement.

The NSC developed the Leadership and Coexistence subcommittee to find and propose feasible solutions to the local Muslim community's problems, suffering from a collective leadership dissonance among the numerous Muslim organisations and groups. First, it questioned the recent trend of 'purposeful isolation' of the Sri Lankan Muslims, which had cut the Muslim community off from the rest of the population and made it vulnerable to suspicions and attacks. The century-long practice of peaceful coexistence with other religious communities had been interrupted, mainly due to the arrival and increasing acceptance of radical ideas imported from other Muslim countries. This, in turn, has led to Muslims being perceived as hostile and foreign elements in the social fabric of Sinhalese society.¹

In this challenging context, the propagation of constructive ideas and methods to re-establish peaceful relations with other religious communities was a vision shared by many Sinhalese individuals and organisations who were used to working and acting independently. The creation of NSC ensured that all local stakeholders in this vision of peaceful coexistence could collaborate effectively in developing a comprehensive plan for Sri Lanka's Muslim community. The subcommittee was founded in 2013 to identify challenges and focus on critical areas. To illustrate these current efforts, one interviewee stated that they hold annual workshops to come up with successful coexistence strategies.²

¹ National Shura Council, "Road Map to Co-Existence" (Colombo -Sri Lanka, 2013).

² Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, October 15, 2019.

Data Collection

This is a qualitative study that relies on both primary and secondary data. The author interviewed five individuals from the National Shoora Council for primary data collection. The secondary sources consulted are research articles, dissertations, books, newspaper articles, websites, videos, activity reports, and publications.

The viewpoint of NSC on Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)

BBS is a prominent nationalistic organisation in Sri Lanka. It was formed after the civil war to maintain the supremacy of the ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist population by propagating anti-religious and anti-ethnic ideology. BBS poses a significant threat to interreligious harmony in Sri Lanka; therefore, the researcher intended to explore NSC's perspectives on BBS militant ideology. They consider BBS to be nothing more than a mercenary of wealthy domestic and international paymasters and thus solely motivated by financial gain. In other words, when Sinhalese interests are championed over the interests of the wider Sri Lankan community, the popularity and influence of BBS rise, and with it, increased financial rewards.

Both the first and fourth interviewees expressed this viewpoint. According to the first interviewee, this is a post-war phenomenon financed by certain geopolitical factions and strategic international players who benefit from polarised communities, inter-communal tensions, and armed conflicts.¹ According to the second interviewee, BBS is an extremist organisation that should be declared illegal and banned. Similarly, the fourth interviewee stated that every type of religious and communal conflict is, in fact, orchestrated and instrumentalised to further the interests of some involved parties. He proved this by quoting a news article dated March 9, 2013, which stated that the president's younger brother, the second most powerful man in the country, was a VIP guest at the formal launch of BBS, which is nothing short of an ethnic-religious fascist movement.

According to the third and fifth interviewees, BBS began targeting the interests of Sri Lankan Muslims by spreading lies and raising anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments among other religious groups, particularly Buddhists. According to the fifth interviewee, BBS has ties with Ashin Wirathu, the leader of Myanmar's extremist 969

¹ Riza Yahiya (one of the Vice President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 19, 2021.

organisation. He said, *"In 2014, he stated that 969 and I would work together with Sri Lanka's BBS to protect Buddhists all over the world."*¹ Furthermore, according to the fifth interviewee, BBS enjoys the support of so-called 'traditional Muslims' (i.e., Sufi sects) and local ex-Muslims² who have openly left Islam and justified their rejection of Islam.³

However, NSC asserts that they do not wish to formally respond to the allegations and wrongful claims propagated by BBS. This would only add credibility to their movement; however, BBS are merely a group of mercenaries and does not represent the Sinhalese Buddhist community. All interviewees agreed with this view. The second and fifth interviewees agreed that they had discussed all these issues at length in their meetings. The fourth interviewee added that engaging in a dialogue with BBS is futile because they only intend to discredit Islam and the Muslims and hurl their polemics at them. Thus, honest dialogue can only be done with the proper authorities.

Programs to Foster Religious Coexistence

Following the formation of the Leadership and Coexistence subcommittee, the NSC started identifying the concerns and implementing the course of action after deciding to publish its definition of coexistence. It is worth looking at the subcommittee's coexistence initiatives to implement its action plan, some of which are currently in process. When the researcher visited Sri Lanka in 2019, she found they are honest efforts to promote religious coexistence in Sri Lanka. Moreover, due to a shortage of funds and the banning of some member organisations, several NSC members and their relatives have been detained on suspicion of being involved in the Easter Sunday attack⁴.

¹ "Radical Myanmar Monk Joins Hands with Sri Lankan Buddhists | Reuters," accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-buddhism-myanmar-idUSKCN0HO0GD20140929>.

² See <https://www.facebook.com/cemsl.org/> for further details.

³ Faleel M.H.M (one of the Vice President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, July 7, 2021.

⁴ The Easter Sunday attack, which was the worst terror attack on the 21st of April 2019, was the subject to a serious question the systematic and well organised religious measure taken by Muslim leaders. The Easter Sunday attack, which was held in April 2019, considered as the deadliest attack in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war in 2009. Three-star hotels in the city of Colombo, as well as three prominent churches in Colombo, Negombo, and Batticaloa, were entirely destroyed in the terrorist attack. Moreover, more than 250 people were killed and almost 400 more were severely injured, including many tourists in this horrific terror attack on Easter Sunday

The fourth respondent elaborated, saying: We cannot do anything right now since we do not have any finances and have a policy of not accepting funds from outside sources. Right now, we have also not done anything in particular, and one of the key reasons is that a lack of funds severely hampers us. Another concern is that several member organisations used to give a certain amount every month, but that has all stopped. After the Easter attacks, everything came to a standstill since we did not know which way it was headed. The Criminal Investigation Department has asked me to give a statement for more than forty-five minutes as the president of NSC. They also gathered all the member organisations' names, phone numbers, and addresses of all the MO presidents. Moreover, they explained that one of the arrested people had called the NSC phone.¹

However, the NSC must consider the backlash from this heinous attack on innocents and be prepared for its potential consequences. They firmly believe that NSC tactics should change after April 21 in the interest of all Sri Lankans. The fifth interviewee acknowledged this, saying: We cannot work like this further; our approaches and priorities must be changed. In truth, we have already made several mistakes on our path. So, the NSC decided to meet with several notable ulama and professionals in this area to gather their perspectives and suggestions on four critical questions, such as what mistakes we made that caused this deadly catastrophe. What are the current issues that Muslims face? What should our priorities be right now? How do you define a strategic plan to deal with future scenarios?²

Based on the above, it is evident that NSC has not abandoned its coexistence initiatives. It is worth mentioning, however, that it is still in its early stages and yet to develop its full potential. Aside from that, NSC has not published any written material yet, neither in the form of newsletters nor annual activity reports to update on its activities. Access to its official website has also been restricted due to government action. Nonetheless, several elements have influenced the coexistence of activities and projects since 2019, notably in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. The researcher analysed the actions of the NSC subcommittee on coexistence through delivered talks and

¹ Azoor T.K (President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 27, 2021.

² Faleel S.H.M (one of the Vice President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, July 7, 2021.

presentations. In addition, information was shared by the interviewees, who described the plan and initiatives of the NSC subcommittee.

The Islamic concept of coexistence

The concept of coexistence is a relatively recent development within the Muslim community. In preceding eras, Muslims were not confronted with these challenges above, and Islamic organisations did not prioritise these matters either. Hence, the NSC sought to establish a comprehensive understanding of the notion of coexistence between adherents of Islam and those of other faiths. To this end, they released a publication titled "Islamic Concept and Basis for Tolerance and Coexistence" in both Tamil and Sinhala languages. This book encompassed insights derived from Islamic teachings found in the Qur'an and Hadith, shedding light on the principles and practices of coexistence. All member organisations of the NSC back the endorsement of this initiative, and the contributions of As-sheikh S.H.M Faleel were crucial in the development of the book's content.

The NSC subcommittee predominantly employs this book as a means to acquaint and engage the general public and other individuals in discussions surrounding the book. The second interviewee asserted that individuals did not embrace this notion, contending that there exists no such link inside Islam but rather a dichotomy of truth and untrue. The NSC laid the foundation for religious coexistence initiatives by offering a particular definition of the notion of coexistence. This definition has been crucial in facilitating the understanding of contemporary concerns from the perspective of the Muslim community.

The NSC subcommittee primarily uses this book to introduce and discuss the book with the general public and others. The second interviewee stated, "*People did not accept this and said there is nothing like this relationship in Islam, only true and untrue.*"¹ The NSC laid the foundation for endeavours promoting religious coexistence by offering a particular definition of the idea. This definition serves as a framework for understanding contemporary matters through the lens of the Muslim perspective.

Furthermore, the National Unity Council (NSC) disseminated publications in the Sinhala language on specific occasions to promote the notion of unity and highlight the contributions of Muslims to both

¹ Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 20, 2021.

the Buddhist community and the nation as a whole. Notable examples of these publications include "*Contributions of Muslims of Sri Lanka to Independence*", "*Let us Love and Enrich the Motherland*", and "*Labor Day from a Humanitarian Perspective*". The leaflets provided below articulate the perspective of the Muslim population residing in the region, elucidating their aspirations for a harmonious and cohesive Sri Lankan society.

The curriculum of Arabic *madrasahs*

During the subsequent phase, the National Shoorā Council (NSC) panel released a publication pertaining to the regional Arabic *madrasahs*. These educational institutions play a vital role in imparting an inclusive and tolerant message of Islam by providing instruction and guidance to young Muslims in matters pertaining to their faith. It is imperative to provide comprehensive training to young Muslim students, as they possess a malleable mindset and can significantly contribute to the broader societal framework. The second interviewee stated, "*It does not matter how much we talk about coexistence; we need to make changes in the Arabic colleges since they would guide the Muslim community and the nation once they graduate from the madrasahs.*"

The work titled "Islamic Procedures in a Pluralistic Society – Documents for the Syllabus of Arabic Colleges" provides a significant contribution to the given environment. The purpose of this book is to guide the development of curriculum and syllabi for Arabic institutions in Sri Lanka, with the aim of cultivating proficient and knowledgeable scholars capable of effectively guiding their community.¹ Nevertheless, the successful execution of such a comprehensive and enduring strategy necessitates substantial backing from the relevant governing bodies.

The effort to reform the *madrasah* system was launched by the NSC prior to the Easter Sunday attacks. However, in the aftermath of this tragic event, there was a noticeable increase in anti-Muslim sentiments, predominantly targeting these Arabic colleges that were intended to impart teachings on Islamic extremism. There is a growing demand within the Buddhist community to shut down Arabic *madrasahs* completely. Fortunately, with the support provided by the Department of Muslim Cultural Affairs, several Islamic organisations have taken steps to address this matter and mitigate the implementation of such drastic measures. However, the *madrasahs* must enhance their endeavours in

¹ NSC, "NSC-Coexistence Final Report," 2015.

order to foster inter-religious tolerance and social integration, aligning with the objective of the NSC and its Muslim ulama.

Capacity Buildings of Resource Persons

The responsibility for organising events that have a significant and enduring impact in Sri Lanka lies with community leaders and accomplished individuals who possess recognition and acceptance within the wider community. In order to effectively safeguard and advocate for the interests of the Muslim community at the local level, *ulama* and other religious leaders must possess a comprehensive understanding of the religious teachings and values upheld by various ethnic communities. This knowledge serves as a crucial tool in bridging the existing divide between these communities. In contemporary society, it is imperative for individuals who identify as Muslims to actively engage with diverse cultures, effectively communicate in their languages, and have a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives.

Consequently, the NSC provides important training to its members, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively assume their new responsibilities within Sri Lankan society. The training modules have been developed based on the Train-The-Trainer Workshops (TOT) conducted by the Walpola Rahula Institute.¹ Typically, a cohort of four representatives is chosen from each religious community to assume leadership roles in the sessions. Moreover, all members of the NSC are strongly encouraged to engage in these initiatives, which encompass comprehensive multi-religious education training and collaborative group activities. The primary objective of these programs is to foster an environment conducive to cultivating respectful interactions among individuals of diverse faiths while also facilitating the exchange of religious knowledge. An illustration of this can be seen in the inclusion of all three aspects within the "Dialogue for Social Healing" training program. The program aims to cultivate the cognitive and affective capacities of individuals in order to foster religious coexistence and harmony within the context of Sri Lanka.

A number of individuals who actively strive to promote religious tolerance for the purpose of fostering harmonious coexistence on a national level have emerged. These individuals who have received specialised training have a significant and enduring influence on the

¹ NSC, "NSC-Coexistence Final Report," 2016.

perceptions of local Muslims and Islam, among other religious communities in Sri Lanka. They are able to foster social cohesion via the implementation of this approach effectively.

Awareness programs for the Muslim society

When the members of the Muslim community possess a comprehensive understanding of the broader community and the nation's imperative for social harmony and peaceful coexistence, they can engage in cooperative efforts and partnerships to facilitate inter-communal activities and engage in substantive dialogues with individuals of different religious beliefs. The Subcommittee for Peaceful Coexistence under the NSC orchestrated public programs and seminars with the aim of providing educational opportunities to the Muslim community regarding this significant matter. The organisation known as the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) facilitated the organisation of a public program focused on promoting peaceful coexistence, as well as a seminar dedicated to fostering interfaith discussion.¹ These types of activities are coordinated in various geographical areas throughout the nation, with the support of collaborating member organisations.

Similarly, in response to the current situation in Sri Lanka, the NSC initiated a program including trustees, school principals, and professionals from the Muslim country to reach out to the other local communities. The goal of this program is to guide the Muslim public in their interactions with residents from other faiths and their role in the village community.

The NSC subcommittee has undertaken extensive travel throughout the country in order to accomplish its goal and enhance public knowledge. It has involved visiting numerous villages and districts, including Kandy, Gampola, Nuwara Eliya, Batticaloa, Ampara, Galle, and Trincomalee. The individuals in question have engaged in meetings with various stakeholders, including mosque committee members, trustees, ulama, school principals, and other members of the public. The purpose of these discussions has been to address the matter of religious coexistence, specifically focusing on the Islamic practice of fostering robust and trustworthy relationships with communities of different faiths. The agenda has encompassed the identification of appropriate approaches, the anticipation of potential obstacles, and the formulation of strategies to surmount these challenges.

¹ NSC.2016

The purpose of these kinds of activities is best summarised in the following words: "Normally, everyday people connect with business communities, three-wheel drivers, youth, children, public transportation, hospitals, and many more. Moreover, problems are bound to arise from these situations." Often, it takes only one act of blunder committed out of ignorance or carelessness to jeopardise the welfare of the entire community. For this reason, all Muslims must work together to keep others in check and teach them how to act wisely when interacting with other communities, especially Buddhists.¹ In addition, NSC has organised other activities, such as Friday sermons on the concept of peaceful coexistence in Islam, as suggested by one of the interviewees who felt that mosques should contribute to educating their community and offer practical moral instruction to their congregation.

Students at university report many problems when interacting with students from other communities, as most have not been exposed to such a mixed environment before. In its efforts to educate Muslim students correctly to instil and maintain social harmony, NSC arranged workshops for high school and college students. Further, it organises guidance programs for university students, encouraging them to approach and engage with other community students. Every NSC member organisation implements these programs in accordance with NSC guidelines.

One interviewee explained that 90 per cent of students from the Muslim community study in Muslim schools, and their first interactions with the Buddhist community happen at university. Hence, they encounter numerous challenges like culture, language, and perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to guide them in developing amicable relationships with Buddhists and other faiths, as this will lead to other stages of community interactions. I recently met a final-year university student. He told me that I was looking for you to thank you because when I first came here, I did not know anything or anyone from the Buddhist community or the Sinhala language. However, now I am one of the best interactors among my batchmates with Buddhist students,' he continued. I learned this guidance from your programs, and I owe you

¹ S.H.M.Faleel- Official, "Co-existence and Islam in Tamil by Ashsheikh S.H.M.Faleel(Naleemi),2017, You Tube Video, 26:16. <https://youtu.be/Wqs2vF3WIVk>.

gratitude.¹ Thus, the coexistence subcommittee of the NSC seeks to raise awareness and educate Muslim community members from all sectors to develop bridges to religious coexistence in every way feasible.

Meeting with religious leaders

Religious leaders hold a crucial position within each community, necessitating the cultivation of constructive associations with Buddhist clergy, Hindu priests, Christian fathers, and Muslim ulama. In order to cultivate inter-communal connections, the NSC arranged a series of cordial discussions with religious leaders and facilitated collaborative initiatives.

The second respondent commented, "*We have organised a two-day trip with the support of Muslim aid to bring young monks and young ulama together. This was a good and effective program that we carried out in order to build excellent bonds beyond religion and culture. They travel, dine, converse, and exchange friendly sentiments.*"²

Furthermore, many influential Buddhist monks who hold positions as university scholars, chancellors, and the like came together with their Muslim counterparts and discussed the development of community harmony. One of the interviewees shared that Ven Prof. Kumburugamuwe Vajira Thero, chancellor of Sabragamuwa University in Sri Lanka, is one of the significant Buddhist monks with whom the NSC discusses religious coexistence in the nation. In addition, we met with Hindu priests. Furthermore, the NSC collaborated with forums comprised of inter-leaders in order to achieve religious unity. In this context, the Interreligious Dialog Forum has membership and a solid relationship with the Interreligious Women Forum, including Muslim *Ulama*.

The NSC endeavours to cultivate significant connections with Buddhist monks and other religious leaders, as well as engage in religious forums. Through these efforts, the organisation aims to bridge the gap between different religious communities and facilitate the introduction of Islam to other communities. The ultimate goal is to promote understanding and empathy, replacing fear and ignorance as guiding principles.

¹ Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 20, 2021

² Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, October 15, 2019.

Program for Key Opinion Leaders (KOL)

Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) are individuals and groups who can influence their community through their stated opinions, talks, and lectures. They include journalists, military, health officials, government personnel, and public figures. On this basis, the NSC Subcommittee for Peaceful Coexistence organised individual and group meetings with key opinion leaders such as the well-known journalist Victor Ivon and Br. Charles Thomas, the Founder and Director of Daham Pahana Charitable Trust, supports religious dialogue among the Buddhist community. The second respondent explained: We had formed a friendship with Brother Charles Thomas over three years; it did not happen in a single day. He has had a significant impact on the Buddhist community and other communities. We bring him to visit the locations attacked through this relationship, including Chilaw, Nikaweratiya, Kuliypitiya, Hettipola, Bingiriya, Kobeigane, and Wariyapola. We also went to their residence. Severe violence erupted in the Naththandiya areas [like] Kotramulla and Thummodera. Fauzul Amir, forty-five [years old], was slain by mobs in this incident. After that, only during one of his programs at Colombo's Sugathadasa Stadium, a multi-purpose stadium, he presented the children of the mob's victims, explaining the country's condition and emphasising the importance of social harmony in preventing such unpayable losses. More than three thousand Sinhalese, including army commanders, officers and professionals, it was a powerful message to the country.¹

Similarly, a number of programs and iftar gatherings have been arranged for divisional secretariat offices, nurses, army officials, and various other individuals. These diverse assemblies delve into the essential aspects of mutual existence, discourse, and endeavours aimed at fostering pluralism throughout society.

Meeting with national organisations

Numerous national-level organisations in Sri Lanka endeavour to foster national cohesion and cultivate an atmosphere of religious inclusivity. Government agencies have established certain organisations, whereas others are categorised as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Nevertheless, a primary objective of these organisations is to foster unity

¹ Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, October 15, 2019.

and conciliation among many religious and ethnic groups within Sri Lanka. The NSC fosters strong partnerships with these groups and organises events to execute initiatives within this framework effectively. *"As the NSC is not an implementing agency, we assist the competent authorities and organisations in implementing initiatives that benefit all communities in Sri Lanka. 'Most of the time, they include our thoughts and comments into their efforts to promote religious harmony,"* stated the second interviewee.

The NSC has hosted several meetings to discuss the issue of peacebuilding and establishing unity and harmony in Sri Lanka, for instance, with Punarudaya, National Intellectuals Organization, Religions for Responsible Governance (RRG), Puravasi Balaya, Office for National Unity and Reconciliation, Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation (CPBR), National Peoples Movement (NPM), and Kandy District Interreligious Committee.

The Kandy District Interreligious Committee, with the support of the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, prepared a citizens' commission report that included details about discovering the truth about the ethnic violence that occurred in March 2018 against the Muslim community in Digana, Theldeniya area, and citizens commission information on public consultation to prevent ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka in the future that occurred on the March 13 two thousand eighteen.

In essence, the primary objective of the NSC is to cultivate and sustain positive intercommunity relations by coordinating and advocating for various initiatives and endeavours. The NSC demonstrates a consistent willingness to engage in collaborative efforts with various communities, with the aim of organising joint initiatives, providing assistance to impactful programs, and exploring innovative strategies to promote religious coexistence within the context of Sri Lanka. The endeavours undertaken by the NSC subcommittee to foster religious harmony in Sri Lanka are organised and implemented in the following manner. The interviews conducted indicate that the NSC does not function as an organisation focused on activities or implementation. Instead, its main responsibility is to provide support to the relevant authorities and guide them in developing strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting harmonious relations, particularly between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka. The NSC examined its mission in order to identify specific areas of significance. The researchers identified the origins of social discord, along with the major concerns, and

subsequently provided suggestions to the constituent organisations, as well as other responsible entities overseeing the Muslim community, drawing from their findings. Coexistence is not a priority on most member organisations' agendas, which suggests that most Islamic organisations prioritise religious affairs, education, and reformations over coexistence-related activities and concepts. Most organisations emphasise activities rather than strategic solutions, and they are limited to specific (traditional) activities and programs without considering other aspects such as strategy and effectiveness or trying out new approaches. Also, they tend to work without a clear plan and target, which means that they lack a long-term or short-term strategic plan or project on coexistence or annual target, in addition to poor coordination with other Islamic organisations, which means that certain events are duplicated. Further, most organisations operate in relatively similar and limited fields, such as providing dry goods, disaster relief, school equipment assistance, eye treatment camps, blood donation campaigns, etc. They also seldom focus on disaster prevention or collaborate on the national level.¹

As a result, the NSC subcommittee issues the instructions below to member organisations (MO) and individuals. Their motto is to be proactive rather than reactive, which means that rather than reacting to a bad situation, they prefer to take the necessary steps to prevent it from occurring or contain it. Therefore, MOs should commit 10 per cent of their attention to community coexistence and develop and implement initiatives in accordance with guidelines. Further, at least 20 per cent of their activities should concentrate in Tamil areas, as most programs involve the Buddhist communities and are conducted in Sinhala. Micro-level actions are more significant and influential than macro-level actions and require minimal financial support, unlike big projects that need much funding and might prove ineffective. Every single individual and organisation have a role to play in this matter, as coexistence is the shared responsibility of all Sri Lankans. After all, nobody wants to witness another period of conflict and communal violence.²

Since its establishment in 2013, the NSC subcommittee has undertaken and overseen numerous operations. Based on the accounts

¹ Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, October 15, 2019 & June 20, 2021.

² Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, October 15, 2019.

provided by the interviewees, it is evident that the NSC ceased these endeavours after the occurrence of the Easter Sunday assaults. Due to its encompassing nature as an umbrella organisation comprising numerous entities and persons, the organisation had limitations in its ability to prevent certain member organisations from being subjected to governmental bans and individuals from being apprehended under suspicion of their involvement in the assaults. The NSC members were also tasked with addressing multiple inquiries in order to verify that none of them had affiliations with extremist organisations, as claimed by individuals with anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments.

Nevertheless, the NSC successfully persisted in coordinating various events at both community and national levels. Notably, they recently conducted COVID-19 awareness workshops in partnership with esteemed medical practitioners and public health authorities. Nevertheless, a number of NSC projects were unable to come to fruition as a result of inadequate support and financial limitations.

One of the NSC's notable accomplishments was the development of a curriculum for Sri Lankan Arabic colleges or *madrasahs*, intending to integrate those Islamic educational institutions with the national syllabus, which includes new methodologies and practical approaches. Unfortunately, without the cooperation of the relevant authorities, these efforts did not come to fruition and fell short of their implementation. Therefore, the researcher strongly recommends reviewing and reconsidering this suggested curriculum for implementation, even with some minor changes, based on discussions with the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs and All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the leading Islamic organisation in Sri Lanka. In the meantime, anti-Muslim agitation continues, and Buddhist extremists still call for the abolition of *madrasah* education.

To raise more awareness, the NSC coexistence subcommittee continues to organise public events and seminars to improve religious harmony among the Muslim population, annual events, Friday sermons, and student talks to encourage the younger generation to step outside their comfort zone and engage with other religious communities. NSC specifically targets university undergraduates because most of them come from Muslim schools, have no knowledge of other religions, especially Buddhism, and have never interacted with non-Muslims. Concerning the village communities, NSC has organised outreach and awareness programs in mosques in collaboration with trustees, school principals, and *ulamas*. Furthermore, NSC has maintained continuous

and improved contact with numerous civic organisations and public figures, such as social activists, journalists, writers, and TV personalities, to deliver their message to the broader public.

Notably, NSC has a strong relationship with the journalist Victor Ivon and Br Charles Thomas from the Buddhist community. Similarly, they have maintained intense contact with the recently deceased Sri Lankan musician Sunil Perera, whose songs exposed the lies surrounding the BBS propaganda of *wanda pethi* (infertility drugs) in his songs. These and similar initiatives have elicited positive responses from other communities as well.

Furthermore, NSC maintains strong contacts with other organisations engaged in interreligious dialogue and supports them in whatever manner possible to promote religious harmony among the different religious and ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. For the past five years, NSC has been a guiding and supporting umbrella organisation, allowing them to analyse the situation and assume a broader viewpoint on specific issues. It has used its experience to make valuable recommendations to member organisations and the authorities. This kind of critical review is a significant step in identifying existing challenges and proposing adequate solutions in the form of new projects and ideas.

As a collective body, the NSC concentrates on encouraging the change of social dynamics and behaviours in society in cooperation with the authorities. However, one NSC representative among the interviewees mentioned that the NSC required financial support and funding to implement its coexistence plan. Although NSC has a strong team of professionals, academics, and religious experts on board, its operations are often limited to their initial stage. Thus, front workers often volunteer, and guests must cover travel expenses. Also, religious coexistence initiatives need to be better coordinated and more action-oriented.

Strategic plan of the NSC subcommittee

As soon as NSC realised the significance of coexistence initiatives in the context of Sri Lankan society, it created a strategic plan to realise them. Following discussions with relevant professionals and scholars, a strategic plan to achieve social unity and religious harmony was developed titled "A Road Map to Coexistence." This plan identified the critical areas on which this committee would concentrate its efforts in Sri Lanka: religion, society, media, art, law, economy, education, politics, information and research, and international relations.

Regarding this situation on the ground, the first interviewee stated that this plan is a general conceptual overview, while certain events may occur that are influenced by other geopolitical and economic factors. According to the second interviewee, however, the local Muslim organisations do not consider social coexistence and religious tolerance as priority issues. It can be concluded that NSC's overall vision and plan do not change, but its approaches and methods may, in response to the changing situation.¹

According to the interviewees' explanations regarding the general strategy, they acknowledged that the NSC subcommittee for coexistence created the plan as an initial first step yet failed to realise it due to a lack of support and funding. Also, they had to modify their initial plan to accommodate changes on the ground. The second interviewee argued that NSC could not gain public support without the support of ACJU, which rejected the proposed national framework.²

According to the fourth respondent, the coexistence campaigns were interrupted by the Easter Sunday attacks and thus beyond its control.³ However, despite all these challenges detailed above, NSC remains loyal to its plan to firmly establish the principle of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the fabric of Sri Lankan society, yet the realisation of this plan has no assigned time limit, and its mechanism is always open to review, considering the changing circumstances.

Challenges

Coexistence issues are prevalent in societies across various countries, however, with variations influenced by factors such as the country's stability, resource availability, and exposure to external influences. Sri Lanka, like many other countries, has a diverse range of religious and ethnic groups, making it a typical example rather than an exceptional case. However, the Muslim minority population may have distinct obstacles that differ from those faced by other communities. As a religious minority community, it encounters numerous challenges in fostering coexistence with the Buddhist majority populace. Hence, the

¹ Riza Yahiya (one of the Vice President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 19, 2021.

² Saiful Islam M.G (President, Subcommittee of co-existence -NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 20, 2021.

³ Azoor T.K (President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 27, 2021.

accomplishment of developing coexistence using a singular technique is a formidable undertaking.

The second interviewee participating in this study explained that Sri Lanka is a postcolonial country that continues to suffer from inter- and intra-communal problems, many of which are the legacy of the imperial power.¹ This study elucidates the issues by drawing upon the insights provided by the interviewees, who offer their perspectives derived from their substantial expertise and comprehensive perspectives. The primary obstacle to achieving coexistence inside the nation is the presence of political issues. Various local and global variables contribute to the emergence of additional challenges, resulting in societal disorder and an ongoing state of conflict among different interests.

It is recommended that Sri Lanka establish a centralised institution that effectively addresses the concerns and grievances of all communities inside the nation, encompassing many dimensions such as religion, ethnicity, and culture. One drawback of coexistence is the absence of a comprehensive national system. Moreover, the government possesses exclusive jurisdiction at both the national and subnational levels, necessitating government collaboration and endorsement for the implementation of any formulated strategy. Therefore, a separate entity at the national level must take on the responsibility of facilitating this coordinated assistance.

Public media is widely recognised as a highly effective method for the dissemination of information. The communication of messages to the public presents a significant difficulty due to the biased portrayal of Muslims and Islam by the national media, as well as the limited influence of the Muslim minority in the public arena. Furthermore, it is important to note that a financial foundation underpins every initiative or program. Insufficient financial resources provide a substantial hindrance to the successful implementation of initiatives across a broad range. Occasionally, a project is initiated but remains unfinished as a result of insufficient financial resources. The present scenario pertains to the NSC, an organisation that does not receive any external funding and instead relies solely on private donations from generous individuals and a limited number of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Moreover, the current global pandemic has had a significant economic influence on ongoing endeavours.

¹ Riza Yahiya (one of the Vice President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 19, 2021.

One additional obstacle is the significant impact of insufficient community support on coexistence initiatives. Active participation from all individuals is necessary for the successful completion of the majority of NSC projects. Nevertheless, the NSC has significant challenges in establishing collaborations with a wide range of groups and individuals within society, primarily due to their self-centred and limited viewpoints, with only a handful of altruistic supporters being the exception. In 2019, the researcher conducted a visit to Sri Lanka with the purpose of gaining insight into the coexistence efforts undertaken by local Muslim organisations. During this visit, it became evident to the researcher that the plan and initiatives implemented by the NSC subcommittee exhibited the most potential for success. It was primarily attributed to the committee's comprehensive approach and consistent efforts. However, it is important to note that the NSC subcommittee faced setbacks following the Easter attacks. A similar observation was made by the fourth respondent, who said: We can not do anything right now since we do not have any finances and have a policy of not accepting funds from outside sources. Right now, we have also not done anything in particular, and one of the key reasons is that a lack of funds severely hampers us. Another concern is that several member organisations used to give a certain amount every month, but that has all stopped. After the Easter attacks, everything came to a standstill since we did not know which way it was headed. The Criminal Investigation Department invited me to give a statement for more than forty-five minutes as the president of NSC. They also gathered the names of all the member organisations and the names, phone numbers, and addresses of all the MO presidents. Moreover, they explained that one of the arrested people had called the NSC's phone.¹

Based on the available evidence, it is apparent that the NSC has not forsaken or relinquished its coexistence initiatives. It is important to note, however, that there are limitations to what can be accomplished within a limited timeframe.

Conclusion

The NSC actively endeavours to promote religious coexistence among diverse ethnic groups, with a specific focus on enhancing links with the Buddhist community. This has been achieved through the establishment of a distinct division and the implementation of several initiatives and

¹ Azoor T.K (President, NSC), in discussion with the Reseacher, June 27, 2021.

programs. Nevertheless, numerous obstacles persist that hinder its achievement. Moreover, the strategic capacity of the system is constrained by the resources currently at its disposal, necessitating methodological and organisational adaptations in order to foster broader collaboration across all levels of the nation.

In summary, the NSC has diligently endeavoured to foster religious coexistence in Sri Lanka, dedicating resources and using their accumulated knowledge and skills continuously. Despite employing all of its available resources, it has not yet attained its objective. The NSC should enhance its cognitive capabilities, acquire supplementary assets, and establish novel strategies to address its deficiencies, leverage its advantages, and effectively counter both internal and external challenges. This will enable the entity to actively participate in the process of societal change and facilitate the empowerment of all communities in Sri Lanka to embrace religious and ethnic diversity, thereby effectively addressing sectarian violence and conflict.

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