

# Intellectual Discourse

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2025



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**The Intersection of Theory, Identity,  
and Security in PCVE (Preventing and  
Countering Violent Extremism)**



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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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Volume 33

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## Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

## Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَيَّ	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَيَّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

*Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>*



# **Unraveling the Nexus: Politics, National Security, and the Securitisation of Islam in the Aftermath of Easter Sunday Attacks**

**Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky\***

**Abstract:** A group of religious fanatics, inspired by the ISIS ideology, blew themselves up in high-rise hotels and Churches in several parts of Sri Lanka on 21st April 2019, killing 269 innocent civilians. This event, known as the Easter Sunday Attacks, led the Sri Lankan state to frame Islam, Islamic religious expressions and activities as a security threat. As a result, the government imposed several regulations and policies that restricted the religious space of the community on the pretext of safeguarding national security. Against this background, this study aims to dissect the entire process of how the state constructed Islam as a security threat after the Easter Sunday Attacks, exploring the primary actors, their actions, and the discursive context. To that end, the main argument of the study is that the securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka is an outcome of an effective cooperation between political and state elites and ultra-nationalist majoritarian forces in the country. Furthermore, as the study highlights, the state has been successful in securitising Islam because it has capitalised on the multi-layered discursive ecosystem, such as Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, the dominant security studies paradigm, the ex-Muslim phenomenon, and unintended consequences of Islamic revivalism, to legitimise its claims. Finally, this qualitative study utilised both primary and secondary sources to gather data and the thematic content analysis method was employed for data analysis.

**Keywords:** national security, religious extremism, Sri Lankan Muslims, Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism, Gotabhaya Rajapakse

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**Abstrak:** Sekumpulan fanatik agama, yang diilhamkan oleh ideologi ISIS, meletupkan diri mereka di hotel bertingkat tinggi dan gereja di beberapa bahagian Sri Lanka pada 21 April 2019, membunuh 269 orang awam yang tidak bersalah. Peristiwa ini, yang dikenali sebagai Serangan Hari Easter, menyebabkan negara Sri Lanka merangka agama Islam, ekspresi dan aktiviti agama Islam sebagai ancaman keselamatan. Akibatnya, kerajaan mengenakan beberapa peraturan dan dasar yang menyekat ruang keagamaan masyarakat atas alasan menjaga keselamatan negara. Berdasarkan latar belakang ini, kajian ini bertujuan untuk membedah keseluruhan proses bagaimana sebuah negara membina Islam sebagai ancaman keselamatan selepas Serangan Hari Easter dengan meneroka aktor utama, tindakan mereka, dan konteks wacana. Untuk itu, hujah utama kajian ialah pensekuritian Islam di Sri Lanka adalah hasil kerjasama yang berkesan antara elit politik dan negara serta kuasa majoriti ultra-nasionalis di negara itu. Tambahan pula, Sri Lanka telah berjaya dalam legitimasi pensekuritian Islam kerana ia telah memanfaatkan ekosistem diskursif pelbagai lapisan, seperti nasionalisme Buddha Sinhala, paradigma kajian keselamatan yang dominan, fenomena bekas Muslim, dan kesan-kesan yang tidak disengajakan oleh kebangkitan Islam dalam masyarakat. Akhir sekali, kajian kualitatif ini menggunakan sumber primer dan sekunder untuk mengumpul data dan kaedah analisis kandungan tematik digunakan untuk analisis data.

**Kata kunci:** keselamatan negara, ekstremisme agama, Muslim Sri Lanka, nasionalisme Buddha Sinhala, Gotabhaya Rajapakse

## Introduction

Islam has a long history in Sri Lanka, spanning over a thousand years. It has played a significant role in shaping the country's socio-cultural and civilisational ethos. Despite being a minority community, their contributions to pre-modern Sri Lanka have been well-documented (Dewaraja, 1994). However, the emergence of Sri Lanka as a nation-state led to the rise of inter-communal identity politics and communal polarisations. Unfortunately, this led to the political elites of each community villainising the other. Mainly, Sinhalese Buddhists claimed that they must define the emerging state and its institutional and cultural outlook and portrayed ethnic Tamils and Muslims as the 'new other', capable of challenging the national integrity of Sri Lanka. This exclusivist perspective resulted in the first ethnic riot against Muslims occurred in 1915, and since then, Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism



has constantly intimidated Islam and Muslims for the last century, both implicitly and explicitly (Ali, 2015). In response, Sri Lankan Muslims increased their conservatism and religiously-inspired political thinking to protect their cultural and communal interests in the 1960s, 70s and 80s (Yusoff & Sarjoon & Hussin & Ahmad, 2017). After the end of the civil war between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the intensity of the anti-Muslim narratives of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism increased significantly. As ethnic Tamil separatism was suppressed through military means, Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian forces directed their focus towards Muslims, resulting in the rise of Islamophobic movements in post-war Sri Lanka. These movements became the primary actors who shaped government agendas and public narratives, leading to the targeting of civil and religious liberties of the Muslim community with total impunity. The subsequent governments' tacit support of these narratives further emboldened these movements to continue their discriminatory activities against the Muslim community (Saroor, 2021)

The demonisation of Muslims and Islam in Sri Lanka reached new heights after the tragic Easter Sunday attacks on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019. A group of terrorists, who were influenced by ISIS ideology, carried out simultaneous attacks on three high-rise hotels and churches, killing 269 people. These terror attacks gave more credibility to the claims of the majoritarian Buddhist ultra-nationalist groups who argued that Islam and Muslims pose a significant challenge to the country's stability. The attacks also increased public acceptance of their rhetoric. Consequently, Sri Lanka witnessed a new wave of riots, bullying, and marginalisation against Muslims in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. Nevertheless, compared to the previous anti-Muslim sentiments, post-Easter Sunday developments are unique in an important way. It is that the Easter attack paved the way for the state and the government officials to directly partake in introducing regulations and policies that indirectly legitimise the Islamophobic sentiments of those non-state actors (Mujahidin, 2023). The political and policy-making elites argued that Islam and Muslims poses a challenge to the country's security, framing Islam and Islamic expressions as a matter of security concern. This nexus between political elites, policymakers, and Islamophobic forces became even more apparent in Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government, which was elected in 2019 on a claim that they would fight radical Islam.

His government debated and stressed the need to curb Islamic religious expressions and gave positions to anti-Muslim activists in government committees in the process of constructing Islam as a security threat.

This paper aims to analyse the securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka after the Easter Sunday attacks. It attempts to answer three critical questions: How have the Sri Lankan governments, specifically the Gotabaya Rajapakse government, securitised Islam, Islamic religious expressions, and Islamic activism after the Easter attacks? What contextual and discursive factors legitimise these securitisation moves? How have Muslim community leaders responded to the securitisation moves? To answer these questions, the paper is divided into six sections, including an introduction. The section two briefly discusses research methodology while the section three explores the concept of securitisation and its development. The fourth section focuses on the Sri Lankan government's context and securitisation moves following the Easter attacks. The fifth section explores the discursive ecosystem that facilitated the government's successful securitisation of Islam, while the sixth section analyses the responses of the Muslim community in navigating these challenges. The section seven discusses the recent developments of the national security debates aftermath of the collapse of Gotabaya Rajapakse's regime. The paper concludes with an analytical conclusion.

### **Research Methodology**

This study investigates perceptions, ideas, and social dynamics within the Sri Lankan context using a qualitative research design. Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Specifically, sections three, four, and five of the paper primarily utilised secondary materials, including journal articles, news websites, and social media pages. In contrast, section six was developed entirely from primary data, which consisted mainly of one-on-one interviews with community leaders. The interviewees were selected from prominent civil society organisations within the Muslim community. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, allowing the researcher to identify and examine the underlying ideas and themes flexibly. The analysis was conducted in light of the major research questions that the paper aims to address.

### **Securitisation Theory: Formation and Development**

The theory of 'securitisation' emerged in the 1990s in the context of global security dynamics changes after the Cold War. It was formulated by Ole Waver, Barry Buzan, and Jaap de Wilde in their work 'Security: A New Framework for Analysis.' Their theories eventually became known as the 'Copenhagen School of Security Studies.' According to this school, securitisation involves defining an object or issue as a security problem or threat that poses a risk to the survival of a referent object - such as state, religion, community, or culture (Waver, Buzan and De Wilde, 1998, p. 21). In such cases, political elites think that they are authorised to use any means necessary to deal with these threats (Waver, Buzan and De Wilde, 1998, p. 26). Interestingly, Waver, Buzan, and De Wilde argued that the security threat is a constructed reality rather than an objective phenomenon. In other words, an issue becomes securitised because political elites intentionally speak about it as a 'security issue' (Waver, Buzan and De Wilde, 1998, p. 21) They have other options for addressing it, but they choose to present it as an emergency case that must be dealt with exclusively by themselves. By doing so, political elites try to resist public deliberation and shift a particular political problem from 'normal politics' to 'high politics' (Waver, Buzan and De Wilde, 1998 p. 23). However, the securitisation process can only be successful if the public accepts the claims of the political elites ( Waver, Buzan and De Wilde, 1998, p. 25).

The initial conceptualisation of securitisation was critiqued by later works. They pointed out that the earlier conceptualisation was too elitist and only focused on political elites as the ones who construct security threats. Later scholars added that civil society organisations, media outlets, and religious clergies also succeeded in constructing security threats, and securitisation is not just a top-down process; it could also be a bottom-up process (McDonald, 2008) They also noted that securitisation is not always a temporary exceptional condition, and it could be translated into everyday practice and normalised systemically, ultimately shaping a country's policy and institution-making process (McDonald, 2008). Additionally, they explained that securitisation agents do not construct a security threat out of thin air by merely 'speaking' about an issue as a security threat. Instead, there should be a discursive tradition and supportive societal condition that help the securitisation agents convince the public of the authenticity

of their claim (Balzacq, Basaran, Bigo, Guittet, & Olson, 2010). Some scholars emphasise the securitisation process as having a power dimension, where political actors securitise issues or objects to mute certain voices or dominate over certain actors who could threaten the power distribution of an existing political system (Camps-Febrer, 2020, p.73). Therefore, it is impossible to analyse the securitisation process in isolation from the existing political power-dynamics of a given country.

In light of the evolving theoretical debates, the term ‘securitisation of Islam’ is used here to refer specifically to the phenomenon of portraying Islam, or a particular interpretation of it, as a security threat to the state or the dominant national group within the state. This portrayal of Islam as a threat to national security is a process that can be initiated by political elites, security professionals, and civil society organisations. They rely on specific discursive contexts and ideological frameworks that already view Islam as a danger or an outsider to the nation. Moreover, the construction of Islam as a threat can also be leveraged to shift power dynamics within local contexts.

### **The Revival of National Security and the Easter Sunday Attacks in Sri Lanka: Narratives, Politics and Policies**

On April 19th, 2019, nine suicide bombers blew themselves up in four large hotels in Colombo and three crowded Churches. The well-coordinated and simultaneous attack killed more than 269 innocent civilians and injured more than 500 people (Aljazeera, 2019). Though Sri Lanka had experienced massive suicide attacks previously, the Easter attacks were the first of its kind after the civil war ended between the Sri Lankan state and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009. The bombers were led by a ring leader, Zahran Hashim, who was once a Salafi preacher, turned into a Jihadist (Mujahidin, 2023). The event has had a paradigmatic impact on the perception of the Sri Lankan state and society towards the Muslim community. The attacks paved the way for the political establishment to legitimately recognise Islam and the Muslim community as a security threat and introduce exceptional laws and regulations to control their religious space. As a result, there had been a public outcry leading up to the presidential elections in 2019 demanding that national security needs to be given priority in government policy making process (Rafe, 2019).

This resurgence of national security concerns in Sri Lanka temporarily altered the country's political dynamics, giving former defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse a chance to position himself for the 2019 presidential elections (Miglani & Aneez, 2019). Despite having no political legacy, Rajapakse was known for his authoritarian approach in dealing with public issues during his tenure as defence secretary. He was also recognised for his unwavering support for the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project (Gunasekara, 2013). Against this background, Rajapakse highlighted the threat of radical Islam and promised to eradicate the ideology from the country if he was elected. According to him, the previous government had dismantled Sri Lanka's intelligence system, which allowed Islamist radicals to plan and execute attacks. Rajapakse's victory in 2019 elections, with an unprecedented number of votes, showed that he had successfully convinced the majority Buddhist community, his primary audience, that the country was facing a real threat of radical Islam (Kaleen, 2019). Even though he had been working on his image anticipating a political entrance as someone who could bring new technologies, professionalism, and national culture into governance, it was the revival of the national security discourse after the Easter attacks that paved the way for political debut. Now, as president, he directed his government ministers and officials to articulate policies that ensure the continued securitisation of Islam and the Muslim community, as he had promised during his campaign. The following section briefly discusses a few of those selected securitisation moves -both in the rhetorical and policy levels- taken by the Gotabaya's government officials.

### *Securitisation Moves*

#### a. The Securitisation of Burqa and Niqab:

Importing anti-Burqa politics from a few European countries uncritically, then state minister of public security under the Gotabaya government, Sarath Weerasekara stated on 13th of March 2021 that their government would definitely ban wearing Burqa and Niqab. He stated that 'In the past, Sri Lankan Muslim women and girls never wore the Burqa. It is a sign of the religious extremism that is emerging today, so the permanent ban should be fully implemented. I have signed it, and the regulation will be implemented immediately' (Al-Jazeera, 2021). The proposed Burqa ban was criticised by many as it would further marginalise the already

victimised Muslim minority of the country. Some experts warned that curtailing religious expression is not the way to fight extremism, and it would further exacerbate the situation (Saiya, 2021).

However, examining the minister's securitisation of the Burqa *banspeech* guides us to generate two significant observations. Firstly, Weerasekara tried to portray that radical Islam is a deeply rooted phenomenon within the Muslim community. The Burqa is just a symbol of such transformation. Thus, rather than resorting to temporary bans based on exceptional conditions like what the previous government did, the minister wanted permanent policies and laws to counteract radical Islam. Secondly, by linking the Burqa with national security, the minister implicitly clarifies that national security means the security of Buddhist culture and the majority's culture. While Gotabaya initially securitised radical Islam based on the assumption that it could potentially pose a threat to the sovereignty of the state, Weerasekara's speech, a trusted minister of Gotabaya's government, reveals that referent object of the security has been shifted since *from the state sovereignty to the culture of the majority*. Thus, the state can declare anything a threat to national security deemed strange to the majority community's culture.

#### b. The Securitisation of Muslim Personal Law:

Adding to that, there are Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups in Sri Lanka who relentlessly campaigned that Muslims are trying to impose Shariah laws in the country, with their primary target being the Muslim personal law. They think that existence of Muslim personal law will lead to a "shariatization" of Sri Lanka and threaten the existing culture of the Buddhism. Therefore, those groups demanded the abolition of the Muslim personal law and the implementation of one unified civil law for all citizens (Schonthal, 2016). The former public security minister, Sarath Weerasekera, also echoed this sentiment soon after Easter attacks, saying that *'there should be only one law for all races in the country and no separate universities and laws for Muslims'* (Adaderana, 2019). Then he tweeted again that *'in a unitary country like ours, one law should apply right throughout. There cannot be different laws for different ethnicities as it creates dissent, frustration, and animosity amongst other communities'* (Weerasekera, 2022). Gotabhaya Rajapaksa used this anti-Muslim rhetoric to his advantage in his election campaign. He promised to implement a 'one country one law' policy if elected, which

he followed through on by appointing a task force to prepare an initial report on the 'one country one law project'. However, it is worth noting that the chairmanship of the committee was given to Ven. Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thera, a well-known Islamophobic monk (Keenan, 2021). Interestingly, Gotabaya's appointment of Ven. Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thera indicates a critical feature of the securitisation process of Sri Lanka. It says that the securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka is a joint venture between the political elites and right-wing radical organisations. For example, Ven. Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thera is a member of a militant Buddhist nationalist organisation 'Budu Bala Sena' (Buddhist Power Force or BBS), that mainstreamed Islamophobic discourses in the country since 2012 (Fouz & Moniruzzaman, 2021).

#### c. The Securitisation of Islamic Activist and Religious Organisations:

In a similar fashion, the aftermath of the terror attacks in Sri Lanka, the country's security establishment accused Islamic movements and religious education institutions of promoting extremism, fundamentalism, and terrorism within the country. Even though there was no direct link between those entities and the attacks, they justified their stance by claiming these organisations were promoting Islamic fundamentalism. The security establishment's mantra was that fundamentalism leads to extremism, and extremism leads to terrorism, making a harmonious link between the three. As a result, the security agencies believed that those movements and religious groups indirectly contributed to the attacks by providing an ideological base for the attackers. Against this backdrop, the government initially banned most of the Salafi organisations, accusing them of promoting an intolerant version of Islam known as Wahhabism (Mohan, 2021).

It is worth noting that in addition to targeting Salafi groups, Sri Lankan Jamath e Islami, the oldest Islamic revivalist and reformist movement in Sri Lanka, was also accused of being the catalyst for extremism and terrorism in the country. The former leader of Jamath e Islami, Rasheed Hajjul Akbar, who was a respected Islamic scholar among Sri Lankan Muslims, was arrested by security forces for allegedly expressing fundamentalist ideas in his writings (Wion, 2021). Surprisingly, former Minister of Public Security Sarath Weekarsekara told the media that '*we have identified Hajjul Akbar as one of the masterminds behind the Easter Sunday attacks, and a ringleader along*

with *Nawofer Movlavi*' (Adaderana, 2021). By equating Hajjul Akbar with Nowofer Movlavi, who actually promoted pro-ISIS Jihadist ideas in the country, the minister tried to deliberately expand the list of perpetrators of the terrorist attack covering all the way from text book Jihadists to moderate Islamists and reformists in a generalised sense. To the list, Islamophobic monk Ven. Galagoda, the Gnanasara Thera, added All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the supreme body of Islamic theologians. The monk noted that although they did not directly support the suicide bombers, they shaped the ideological context of radical Islam that gave birth to ISIS ideology in the country (Colombo Today, 2021).

The major implication of such collective securitisation of Muslim community organisations is that even though they are allowed to operate freely and lawfully after clearing their terrorism charges, the security agencies continue to view them through lens of security threat. They frequently visit their offices and programmes and request for updates of their upcoming programmes and name list of participants and cross check the authenticity of information with other members. A leading member of a Muslim organisation commented during an interview with me that 'intelligence establishment try to tell us a message through their continues surveillance: "you are free legally, but you are not free in the true sense, and we are monitoring of your activities". They are trying to create psychological pressure upon us. They see us a source of potential security threat if not now, in the future. They try to keep us under their continuous regime of surveillance' (Respondent 01, Personal Communication with the author, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024). This statement reveals that in Sri Lanka, the securitisation of Islam has been transformed into an everyday reality.

#### d. The Securitisation of Islamic Religious Education:

Moving ahead, Islamic scholars and thinkers have been discussing the question of reforming traditional Islamic religious education system for last two centuries. They explored this arena mainly within the paradigms of educational philosophy, inter-civilisational dialogue, and engagement with modernity (Fouz & Moniruzaman, 2023). However, since 9/11, the need for Islamic religious education reform has been presented in a new language. The discourse now emphasises that the traditional religious education system is a breeding ground for exclusivism, fundamentalism,



and terrorism, and as such, it needs to be reformed as it poses a threat to global security. Despite criticisms from scholars, the stereotypical view persists (Bergen & Pandey, 2010, Ramzy, Alshighaybi & Rislan, 2022). The very stereotypical narratives resurfaced after the Easter attacks, with Sri Lankan policymakers presenting the Madrasa system as a sign of exclusivism and extremism. The Presidential Commission Report 2021 on Easter Sunday attacks and the Parliamentary Oversight Committee Report on National Security suggested that Madrasa education should be reformed to ensure the country's national security (Bappu, 2024). In a webinar hosted by the Institute of National Security Studies, a think tank attached to the Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka, Rasheen Bappu, a leading defence analyst and anthropologist, spoke of the importance of regulating the Islamic religious space, particularly Madrasa education, for the consolidation of Sri Lanka's national security. During his lecture, he criticised the daily Quran classes, that train Muslim children to recite Quran, managed by All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, claiming that they were "*severely overdosing religious education on students*" and that the system should be reformed so that "*the state would have control over the existing system*" (Ministry of Defence, 2021). A new Islamic Education Act was subsequently proposed to the cabinet on 18 July 2019, aiming to de-radicalise the Madrasa system by removing violent/extremist subjects and promoting co-existence and social harmony (Bappu, 2024). Walking on the same logic, the ministry of defence banned importing Islamic religious books except for those the ministry approves in March, 2021 (Islamic foundation, 2021).

#### e. New Regulations for De-Radicalisation :

All the previous attempts at the securitisation of Islam culminated in the Gotabhaya government's desire to introduce new deradicalisation regulations. Gazetted on the 12th of March 2021, the regulations initially provided a broader definition of radicalisation and even approved the suspected individuals to be detained and sent to rehabilitation camps for years without a proper trial. The new regulations were titled '*deradicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology*' and highlighted the police can arrest anyone they suspect of 'being a person who by words either spoken or intended to be read and by signs or by visible representations or otherwise causes or intends to cause the commission of acts of violence' (cpalanka, 2023). Human rights activists noted that given the majoritarian nature of the Sri Lankan

political culture, the political elites who hold the state power might instrumentalise the regulations to demonise the religious and cultural freedom of the minorities, projecting that it is a threat to national security (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). Moreover, as per the regulations, the state could arrest anyone accusing him or her vaguely that their thinking process is extreme. A simple analysis of the act indicated that the rationale behind such flexible regulations might be to allow the state to paint a wide array of religious expressions and activities in the broader brush of radicalisation. Thus, a few leading human rights groups and activists have filed a case against implementing the regulations in the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. Upon long deliberation, the Supreme Court found that the new regulations violated the fundamental rights of citizens, such as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and freedom from arbitrary arrests. In its final decision, it strikingly mentioned that “the definition of “extremist religious ideology” presents inherent difficulties as religious beliefs may vary widely among individuals, with one person’s religious ideology potentially appearing extreme to another. In the absence of clarity, there is a risk of arbitrary decisions being made where certain attitudes, behaviours, attire, etc., can also be deemed as signs of extremist religious ideologies... People cannot be prosecuted, nay persecuted, for merely “holding religious ideology, which the state thinks to be “violent and extremist’. As a result, the Supreme Court declared that new regulations were null and void (cpalanka, 2023).

### **The Discursive Context of Securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka**

The Gotabaya government and the political establishments did not construct a perception of Islam as a threat to national security without a context. This means that the securitisation of Islam did not happen merely because Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his minister of public security and his security establishment spoke about it. Instead, the government officials’ narrative and policies were influenced by a broader set of discourses that had already portrayed Islamic religious practices and activism as a possible source of security threat to the state. In this section, we will briefly examine the four key layers of *discursive ecosystem* that enabled the Gotabaya government to justify its securitisation policies following the Easter Sunday attacks: Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism, Global Security Paradigm, Ex-Muslim Phenomenon and Islamic Revivalism.

### *The Revival of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism*

Firstly, Gotabaya's project to securitise Islam resonated well with post-war political imaginations of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the country. In fact, Gotabaya himself is known as an ardent supporter of the Buddhist majoritarian nationalism which calls to make Sri Lanka an exclusive Buddhist state. According to this project, minorities can live peacefully if they acknowledge the supremacy of Sinhala Buddhist ethno-religious identity. Starting from the 1900s until 2009, this project viewed Christians and Ethnic Tamils as internal enemies because they challenged the unity and integrity of the Buddhist land (Schonthal, 2016). After the civil war in 2009, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist project felt that the continued relevance of majoritarian ethnic nationalism depends upon finding a new enemy. It found a new enemy in the Muslim communities, which they painted as new villain of Sinhala Buddhist political imagination (Dewasiri, 2016, p.06). As a result, post-war Sri Lanka witnessed a new wave of anti-Muslim sentiments and violence. The right-wing Buddhist nationalist organisations such as *Bodu Bala Sena*, *Sinhala Ravaya*, and *Sinha-Le* movements initiated this new wave. They targeted the everyday religious practices of Muslims, highlighting that they are polluting the purity of the Buddhist land. This post-war demonisation of Muslims and collective projection of the community as being the threatening other within the Buddhist state provided the discursive justification for the Gotabhaya government to take the process of the securitisation of Islam into the policy-making level after the Easter Sunday attacks (Imtiyas, 2024). Actually, he presented such measures as signs of Buddhist revivalism under his regime. In his recent book titled 'The conspiracy to outset me from the presidency', Gotabaya mentions that it was Muslims and other minorities who largely supported the protests against him since they saw his rule would pave the way for the revival of Sinhala Buddhism (newswire, 2024).

### *Dominant Security Paradigm and Counter-Terrorism Experts*

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, many security experts emerged and began to play a significant role in constructing a 'regime of truth' about Islam and Islamic revivalist/ activist organisations. Their focus was to address the threat posed by Islam. They developed a set of dominant discourses that portrayed the global system as being perpetually at risk of a terrorist attack and stood for a new global order

based on '*totalising security paradigm*' (Camps-Febrer, 2020, p.74). As such, security experts and professionals became crucial players in formulating and legitimising the laws and state policies that scrutinise the socio-political and economic activism of the Islamic religious organisations for the last two decades. Sri Lanka is not an exception to this global trend as the security experts and professionals effectively involved in enabling the Gotabaya government to successfully project Islamic religious activism as a security threat to the Sri Lankan state. Specially, Rohan Gunaratna, a scholar of International terrorism and the former director general of the Institute of National Security Studies, is a notable figure in this process. For example, Gunaratna tried to convince the Sri Lankan policy makers, officials and professionals that Sri Lanka could face another round of terrorist attacks if the government fails to properly regulate the religious space. He warned that the pipeline that produces religious extremism still alive (Gateway College, 2019). Mainly, he maintained that the Islamist activist organisations and Salafi movements are the primary recruitment sources for Jihadism. Moreover, Gunaratna empathetically stressed that Jihadism is the logical conclusion of the ideology of mainstream Islamist organisations. He noted that those movements inherently promote violence, extremism, and hatred towards non-Muslims, as opposed to Sufism. Therefore, he advised the government to remain vigilant, as the existence of these organisations continues to pose a security threat to the country (Gunaratna, 2023, P.137).

### *Ex-Muslims Factor*

Along with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and narratives of security experts, it is also important to understand the role played by ex-Muslims in securitising Islam in Sri Lanka. They become a valuable source for the government to justify its policies that securitised Islamic activist organisations, mainly after the Easter attacks, 2019. Ex-Muslims are individuals who have left Islam for various reasons such as ideological and experiential ones. They are trying to form their own counter-identity by projecting that radical Islam is currently threatening their lives as well as global peace. This identity formation is a global phenomenon, and its Sri Lankan variant should be seen as an offshoot of global ex-Muslim activism. Interestingly, ex-Muslims have played a crucial role in supporting governments' attempts to securitise Islam globally. Examining their role in constructing Islam as a security threat in the

European context, Jocelyn Cesari highlights that their Muslim origins give them the legitimacy, which is denied to non-Muslims, to their claims in the eyes of states (Cesari, 2012). In Sri Lanka, ex-Muslims were invited by state institutions to give testimonies of so-called 'secret plots of Islamists' (Ismath, 2022). By mimicking the dichotomy of peaceful Sufis vs. radical Islamism, they stressed that Islamists have been trying to convert Sri Lanka into an Islamic state and are ready to wage Jihad when necessary. They mainly argued that Islamists show moderation and ideological transformation as a survival strategy. They testified that Islamists are calling for the full implementation of Islam in Sri Lanka, which is harmful to societal peace. Ordinary Muslims, who are just ritualistic and less concerned about Islam, are peaceful. By reproducing the prevailing conspiracy theories about Islamism, former Muslims claimed that Islamists are strategically and secretly targeting government positions to make a silent Islamic revolution from within (Ismath, 2021). Ex-Muslims wanted the Sri Lankan government to view the Muslim religious space as radical and violent and take all necessary steps to control them.

### *Islamic Revivalism*

Finally, Islamic revivalism, religious activism and tense religious space also unintendedly contributed to the construction of a portrayal of Islam as a security threat to the state in Sri Lanka. Islamic revivalism, which emerged as an anti-colonial movement, aimed to unite the Muslim community around religious sentiments, global Muslim issues, and empower the transnational solidarity (Ali, 2023). This movement reached Sri Lanka in 1940s and 1950s and had a profound impact on shaping the Muslim identity. They played a part in creating a separate religious identity for Muslims in the context of post-colonial identity politics of Sri Lanka (Imtiyas & Saleem, 2022). Over the past four decades, these dynamics have led to an increase in religious visibility, conservatism and intra-communal contestations over the meaning and features of authentic Islam. It is true that these debates over theological and ideological issues have largely shaped the communal divisions (Numan, 2002 & Mihlar, 2019). Unfortunately, instead of being viewed as a part of the evolving discursive debate on the role of religion, religious texts, and tradition in engaging with the larger paradigm of secular modernity and post-colonial identity formation, the right-wing movements and, after the Easter attacks, the state started to securitise

the tense religious space and viewed it as an outcome of an intrusion of foreign religious ideologies into the country corrupting local traditions and unity.

### **The Securitisation of Islam: An Analysis of Muslim Community's Responses**

Muslim community organisations in Sri Lanka have been facing the challenge of mainstreaming securitisation narratives and heightened surveillance of their activities. This paper found that these organisations followed three significant strategies in responding to the Post-easter Sunday securitisation policies and state narratives: *cooperation with the state, challenging the accusations and building bridges between communities*. It is important to note that these organisations have been working to mitigate the ultra-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist movements and their Islamophobic campaign since the civil war ended in 2009. However, their activism intensified in the aftermath of the Easter attacks as the state itself was directly involved in endorsing policies that securitised Islam. This section explores responses of only a few selected leading Muslim community organisations such as All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, National Shura Council, Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami and Muslim Council of Sri Lanka.

#### *Cooperation with the State*

The Muslim community organisations and leaders believed that one of the best ways to convince the state intelligence and security apparatus that they were not promoting extremism and terrorism was to support their investigations in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks. To prove their innocence, they provided all the details of their activities, names of their members, and financial sources to the state. After the Easter attacks, state intelligence sources traced the member's list of the leading Islamic social movements and investigated their relationships and involvement in those organisations (Respondent 01 & 02, Personal Communication with the author, 2024). They even considered independent individuals as potential terrorists for carrying or reading monthly magazines published by those organisations. This had a significant impact on the members of those organisations and dismantled their network and working machinery (Respondent 03, Personal communication with the author, 2024). Even so, the Muslim organisations advised their members to reveal whatever they knew about the organisation's activities to the

state if they were invited for interrogation (Respondent 05, Personal communication with the author, 2024). The Muslim community leaders believe that this positive and open engagement with the state security establishment in their investigation yielded positive results. The state security agencies came to realise that Islamic organisations were legally compliant entities and that none of the leadership of those organisations supported terrorism (Respondent 05, Personal communication with the author, 2024). However, some interviewees highlighted that although the state knew that Islamic organisations were not linked with violence, it attempted to use one against the other to get the information they needed and to relax themselves from taking the responsibility of the burden of proof for their accusations (Respondent 02, Personal communication with the author, 2024).

### *Challenging the Allegations*

It is true that the Muslim organisations cooperated with intelligence agencies to clear their files of any false allegations regarding terrorism and extremism. However, they also worked to make the public aware of the baseless nature of these allegations. To achieve this, these organisations published several books and reports that clarified their ideological principles, socio-political positions, and perspectives on global violent and extremist movements. For example, Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami published a book titled 'Jamaat e Islami is a Sri Lankan Movement' to refute allegations that it was trying to implement a foreign project in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the former head of Jamaat-e-Islami wrote a separate book called 'Baseless Allegations Against Me.' Interestingly, Jamaat-e-Islami translated its constitution and made it available to the public. They did this in the hope that people would understand the movement's policies better (Respondent 05, Personal communication with the author, 2024). They also published another book that clarified their positions on the theological, political, and religious issues concerning the country. In addition, Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami immediately released press statements if any allegations were raised against them by the minister, accusing the movement of promoting terrorism (Respondent 05, Personal communication with the author, 2024). On the other hand, All Ceylon Jamiyythul Ulama (ACJU) published a crucial document that explained the theological and jurisprudential principles that shape the Muslim community at large. This was to make a counterargument against the state's move to

separate Sufis from others based on the notion of ‘good Muslims vs. bad Muslims’ thesis. All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama made it clear that there is no such category as good vs. bad Muslims. Instead, all Muslims are primarily following the same principles of Islam (Respondent 02, Personal communication with the author, 2024).

### *Building Bridges between Communities*

Simultaneously, Muslim community activists strategically tried to expand the relationship with other communities and their organisations through developing collaborative projects. The leadership of the Muslim community organisations understood that these collaborations would help them to clear the misconception of other communities about Islamic organisations. Moreover, it also would help them to expand the working scope to include wide spectrum of people with different faith. For example, Sri Lanka jamaat-e-Islami diversified its activities into two main areas such as community development and nation-building. In addition, they planned a well-coordinated public relations strategy to explain the motivation and aims of the movement to general public and key stake holders of the country. Additionally, they invited leading human rights and peace activists to grace their main events to give talks and to share their ideas with the organisation (Respondent 05, Personal communication with the author, 2024). National Shura Council developed a multiple projects under the concept of ‘*strategic co-existence*’ to strengthen the inter-communal peace between Muslims and Buddhists. The strategic co-existence operated on multiple levels such as revising the curriculum of the Islamic religious education institutions to incorporate peace education, building the capacity of Muslim community leaders to better address the inter-religious co-existence issues in their environments, organizing continues meetings with religious leaders of other faith communities in village areas etc (Afra & Ushama, 2023). Specially, Muslim Council of Sri Lanka along with other organisations directly approached the controversial politicians and right-wing monks to expel their misconceptions about Islam and Muslim communities (Khan, personal communication with the author, 2019). All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama issued a national declaration for inter-religious co-existence to direct Muslim community to work towards empowering the relationship between Muslims and other faith communities (ACJU, n.d).



## **Beyond Gotabaya: National Security Discourse under the New Government**

Sri Lanka experienced a significant political shift over the past two years. In 2022, public protests led to the downfall of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government amid an economic crisis. On September 21, 2024, Sri Lanka elected a new president, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the left-leaning leader of the National People's Power party. Dissanayake became the ninth executive president of Sri Lanka on an anti-corruption and anti-racism platform (BBC, 2024). Sri Lankan Muslims have high hopes that the new president will address issues related to the securitisation of Islam and Islamic practices, while also countering Islamophobic forces that threaten to further divide the country. The new president faced an immediate challenge when intelligence services, both foreign and local, reported a potential terrorist attack targeting Israeli tourists at Arugam Bay, a popular tourist destination in Eastern Sri Lanka (Daily Mirror, 2024). The planned attack was reportedly a response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. This intelligence report reignited the national security debate and discussions on Islamic extremism. Experts like Rohan Gunaratna argued again that national security should be a priority and that the government needs to regulate religious spaces and monitor Muslim organisations (Gunaratna, 2024). In response to these concerns, the new president stated at a public rally that his government would take swift action on national security issues, but would do so without sensationalising the matter to avoid inciting social unrest among communities (SL Noise, 2024). This statement marks a potential shift in how the government addresses national security issues, focusing on them without politicizing the discussion.

### **Reflective Closure**

This paper attempted to examine the process of securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka following the Easter Sunday attacks. The analysis of the process highlights fundamental dynamics that have shaped the securitisation phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Firstly, state actors and security professionals played a crucial role in justifying policies that securitised Islam. However, it is evident that a multi-layered discursive ecosystem that already depicted Islam as a security concern for the country enabled state actors to justify their policies and discourses. Secondly, the securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka is a result of an implicit

collaboration between political elites and extremist organisations such as BBS. This relationship had been kept under the surface before the Easter Sunday attacks. Gotabaya Rajapakse's appointment of an extremist Monk for the 'One Country One Law' project exposed this collaboration explicitly for the first time. Thirdly, the securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka was not a temporary measure that arose after the Easter Sunday attacks and then defused gradually as the ISIS terrorist threat diminished. Instead, the securitisation policies have had a lasting impact on the Sri Lankan Muslim society and its socio-religious organisations as those organisations have still been seen as security threats, and the intelligence apparatus continue to observe their activities and moves. This development indicates that the securitisation of Islam in Sri Lanka has become a mechanism of power that shapes the everyday reality of the community. Despite these realities, the leadership of the Muslim community tries to navigate the conditions of securitisation by cooperating with state security agencies, challenging allegations, and building bridges between themselves and other communities.

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#### Interviewees List

ABM Ashraf, Former Director of the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs, 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2024.

Asker Khan, Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2019).

MHM Hassan, Sri Lanka Jama'ath e Islami, 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2024

NM Ameen, Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2024

Sheik Arkam Noormaith, All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, 03<sup>rd</sup> April, 2024

YLM Haneez, Sri Lanka Jama'ath e Islami, 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2024



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## **Chapter in a Book**

In-text:

Alias (2009)

Reference:

Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

## **Journal Article**

In-text:

Chapra (2002)

Reference:

Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10, 214-232.

## **The Qur'ān**

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

*The glorious Qur'ān*. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

## **Ḥadīth**

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

## **The Bible**

In-text:

Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:

*The new Oxford annotated Bible*. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Transliteration of Arabic words should follow the style indicated in ROTAS Transliteration Kit as detailed on its website ([http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table\\_of\\_Transliteration](http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table_of_Transliteration)), which is a slight modification of ALA-LC (Library of Congress and the American Library Association) transliteration scheme. Transliteration of Persian, Urdu, Turkish and other scripts should follow ALA-LC scheme.

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