AUTOCRATIZATION, BUDDHIST NATIONALIST EXTREMISM AND THE MUSLIM MINORITY IN SRI LANKA

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On 16 November 2019, nearly seven million people, or 52 per cent of registered voters, elected Gotabaya Rajapaksa as President of Sri Lanka. Only five years prior to this his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa had been voted out, with the people rejecting nearly a decade of the Rajapaksa family's authoritarian rule, corrupt politics and nepotism (DeVotta, 2021). Gotabaya Rajapaksa was the defence minister at the time and largely responsible, in 2009, for ending three decades of armed conflict by destroying the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who had been battling Sri Lankan armed forces for a separate state for the country's ethnic Tamils. The Sri Lankan military's handling of the last stages of war has drawn acute international criticism, including by two United Nations investigations which found credible evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity (UN, 2011; OHCHR, 2015). In 2019, the majority of the country's population democratically elected the central person responsible for these crimes to the presidency, fundamentally on the basis that a strong, fearless leader was needed to guarantee security, primarily for the majority Sinhala Buddhist community.

There was little doubt that Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidency would result in an autocratic turn, visible signs of which emerged quite early. A review of his first year shows an increased, centralised role for the military, especially in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic; executive powers were used without parliamentary oversight (Keenan, 2020a; Keenan, 2020b); and as soon as his party won a majority in parliamentary elections, he proceeded to appoint his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister and swiftly introduced constitutional amendments to increase powers of the presidency (ICJ, 2020; CPA, 2020). Democratic decline was also witnessed through the loss of civic space, evidenced in the rapid decrease in public protests and civil resistance movements, such as those by family members of victims of enforced disappearance, whilst many civil society activists and journalists have resigned themselves to self-censorship, fearing a return of the violent repression targeted at them during the previous rule of the Rajapaksas (Fernando, 2020; Satkunanathan, 2020).

The shift towards autocratization analyzed in this chapter is not unprecedented; Sri Lanka's post-independence history is marked by waves of serious democratic decline, the most recent periods being in the late 1980s to early 1990s under the rule of President Ranasinghe Premadasa and 2005–2015 during Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency. Autocratization in both these cases was

enabled and necessitated as a response to a threat to the state and the arbitrary use of vast powers were sought, in the form of emergency and national security regulations, to deal with this threat (Coomaraswamy and de los Reyes, 2004). Both processes of autocratization associated the threat with an ‘enemy’ that had to be countered with the use of extreme violence and military prowess resulting in gross human rights violations. Premadasa’s defeat of the Marxist insurgency by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Mahinda Rajapaksa’s of the LTTE’s secessionism were both violent projects. Enacting mass atrocities then must also be considered a primary feature of autocratization in Sri Lanka.

This chapter assesses the return to autocratization in Sri Lanka and its effect on minorities, with specific focus on the country’s second largest minority group, its nine percent Muslim population. Insufficient consideration is paid to the role of identity politics in the conceptualisation of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019); where for instance change occurs not only because of the weakening of democratic indicators but also, as in the Sri Lankan case, as a result of ethnocracy (DeVotta, 2021). This article takes the position that religion rather than ethnicity is now the dominant identity of the ruling elite in Sri Lanka. Both Rajapaksa brothers have supported and thrived on Buddhist nationalist extremism, an off-shoot of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, more than any other head of state in independent Sri Lanka. In this chapter I will argue that such religio-nationalist extremism is fundamentally attached to this phase of autocratization, aligned on the ideology of Buddhist nationalism, which has as its objective the reinforcing of a Buddhist nation-state and thereby subjugating the religious other who is framed as a threat to reaching their common goal. The construction of a threat is the nucleus of the development of autocratization in Sri Lanka. For Gotabaya Rajapaksa this has a dual nature, because of his association to Buddhist extremism; a threat to state security and Buddhist nationalism.

I will begin by defining Sinhala Buddhist nationalist extremism and explain its relationship to autocratization. Critically engaging with Lewis’s (2020: 21) ‘friend, enemy’ framing, this chapter will analyze the association of this latest autocratization to minority relations in Sri Lanka, specifically to the Muslim population. It will explain how, for autocratization to survive and flourish, Muslims are repetitively identified as a threat and dealt with as an enemy. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the effects of autocratization on the Muslim minority population and their response to it.

Autocratization and Buddhist extremism: conjoined twins

Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has co-existed with, utilised and exploited democratic politics in Sri Lanka since independence (Tambiah, 1986; Holt, 2016; Ismail 2005). Premised on identifying nationhood on ethnic and religious lines, Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups have, over decades, engaged in parliamentary politics, influenced the executive and military and at times supported violence and resisted peace negotiations aimed at ending the armed conflict (Holt, 2016; Schonthal, 2016). Rampton (2011) contends that irrespective of ‘elite instrumentality’ Buddhist nationalism is ‘deeply hegemonic’ in the majority population.

The origins of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka lay in competing Tamil and Sinhalese nationalisms that later led to militancy and civil war. Through most of the civil war the state aligned with Sinhala, Buddhist nationalist ideology and forces, and the triumphant defeat of Tamil militancy and nationalism was a victory for both Buddhist extremists and autocracy, which manifested in image, policy and practice of the post-war state (DeVotta, 2018; Minority Rights Group, 2010).

The post-war Buddhist nationalist state was one where ethnic and religious minorities were not only oppressed but dehumanised and subjugated. As victory celebrations were held in the capital city Colombo marking the end of the war, over 300,000 Tamil war survivors were held in internment camps, separated from their families, physically and emotionally injured and facing daily violations such as extra-judicial killings, abductions and sexual assault (Minority Rights Group, 2010; UN, 2011). When the survivors were eventually released many of them were prohibited from returning home, they faced abject economic difficulties in the areas where they were resettled and were acutely insecure in the presence of the Sri Lankan military whose numbers had risen threefold in comparison to the civilian population (ICG, 2017). Most notably the violations they suffered, including allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, were repetitively denied as was their quest for truth, justice and accountability (ICG, 2017). As Mahinda Rajapaksa grew in power, distinctly authoritarian in rule, the Tamil population in the north and east were left defeated, dejected and dehumanised, which he used to muster credibility and support among Buddhist nationalist forces (DeVotta, 2013; UN OHCHR, 2013; ICG, 2013).

Lewis (2020: 22) using the work of German Jurist Carl Schmitt, illustrates how Mahinda Rajapaksa constructed a 'political community through the constant articulation of distinctions between "them" and "us," between "friend" and "enemy".' He explains how the Rajapaksa regime since 2005 repeatedly differentiated between the LTTE and Tamil community singling out the former 'as the existential public enemy' and thereby denying its legitimacy and representation of the Tamil community. This in effect also negated legitimate Tamil grievances of political and cultural autonomy that stood at the heart of the ethnic conflict (Lewis, 2020: 22).

I find Lewis's 'friend-enemy' model of political society useful with the caveat that despite Rajapaksa's framing, from very early on, in practice and policy 'the enemy' included the Tamil population of the north. The speeches that Lewis references in his analysis were made by Mahinda Rajapaksa when the Sri Lankan government was facing international allegations of war crimes and to redeem his government, making such a distinction was crucial. Lewis recognises that as the construction of this political community was based on Sinhala nationalist discourse rather than 'civic nationalism' it 'repeatedly foundered' and 'the discursive framing always permits the widening of this identification to include a much wider spectrum of possible enemies, both contemporary and historical, internal and external' (Lewis, 2020: 22). Rajapaksa's early rhetorical distinction between Tamils and terrorists enabled him to present his government as 'saving' the former whilst legitimately destroying the latter. However, as previously explained his degrading treatment of Tamil war survivors in the north, blatantly different from the superiority given to Sinhala Buddhists, suggested ambiguity in the boundaries of enmity. This shared anti-minority sentiment is critical to both Buddhist nationalist extremists and autocratization, which within an 'enemy' framework extends to damaging and defeating these groups.

Buddhist nationalist extremism referred to in this chapter is a derivative of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism with higher levels of extremism, violent tendencies and with a greater focus on religion over ethnicity. Arguably this level of extremism and virulence always existed but has gained greater legitimacy and opportunity after the war. Ethnicity and religion were intertwined in nationalism, but without the threat of further ethnic militancy the new strand has taken on more religious fervour. Either way, since 2009, Buddhist nationalist groups with strong extremist tendencies such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Mahasen Balakaya strengthened and began to structurally target Muslims and evangelical Christians (Schonthal, 2016; Imtiyaz and Saleem, 2015). Through well-executed, systematic hate campaigns in mainstream and social media both religious groups were attacked; the former accused of attempting to take over the

country through population growth and economic strength and the latter for proselytisation (Holt, 2016). In subsequent hate campaigns, attacks and violence against Muslims superseded those against evangelical Christians.

Resultantly, as Lewis (2020: 25) states ‘the lines of enmity were reproduced to target Muslims’ constructing them as I have stated in my previous work as the ‘new enemy’ (Mihlar, 2018). Arson and violent attacks on Muslim business establishments started soon after the war and progressed into serious incidents of mob violence led by Buddhist extremist groups between 2013 and 2019 recorded in central and southern Sri Lanka (Mihlar, 2018). Attacks against Muslims were partly premised on accusations that the group enjoyed special legal status as they, together with other religious and caste groups, are governed by personal laws, and receive excessive freedom of religious practice leading to Islamic extremism. The call for prayer from mosques, celebration of religious festivals, public display of religious symbols, dress code for women, marriage and inheritance laws, halal stipulations and slaughter of cattle for religious sacrifice became subjects of virulent criticism on a daily basis in the mainstream and social media (Mihlar, 2018).

The autocratic Rajapaksa regime made minimal effort to limit the hate campaigns and attacks and Buddhist nationalist groups were largely unhindered and, at times, encouraged (DeVotta, 2018). Previously powerful Muslim cabinet ministers and Members of Parliament were unable to wield influence and eventually Muslim religious and political leaders compromised on a number of aspects publicly and privately (Mihlar, 2019). Notable in this relationship between the then government and Buddhist extremists was the lack of protection to minorities offered by other organs of the state. The military and police notoriously delayed their response or failed to offer protection to Muslims on a number of occasions during the violent attacks (Mihlar, 2018). Muslim lawyers and activists have also complained of the lack of judicial recourse in lower courts as well as the country’s Supreme Court tasked with hearing cases of fundamental rights violations (Mihlar, 2018).

When Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated in 2015, Buddhist nationalist extremist groups lowered their profiles for a couple of years but structurally and organisationally remained intact to return when the coalition government weakened and the return of the Rajapaksas was imminent. The 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, when nine ISIS-inspired Muslim suicide bombers attacked Christian churches and Colombo hotels killing 270 people, was the turning point. Within hours of the bombings, hate campaigns accelerated and overnight the Muslim community came under siege through increased surveillance enabled by new national security laws (Satkunanathan, 2020). Religious establishments, madrasas and Islamic pedagogical centres were the main source of tension, many having to close (Satkunanathan, 2020). In May, 2019, the country saw one of the worst religiously targeted incidents of violence as mobs, with police and army complicity, went on a rampage in the north-west of the country damaging, burning and vandalising mosques and Muslim neighbourhoods (Bastian, 2019; Mihlar, 2019). In the same month then-President Maithripala Sirisena pardoned and released from prison the leader of the BBS, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a move criticised by international human rights organisations and one clearly meant to appease influential extremists in his majority Buddhist voter base (Bastian, 2019). Another consequence of the Easter Sunday attacks was the targeting of Muslim political leaders for their previous association with one of the bombers and a religious group linked to the attacks. A hunger strike initiated by a Buddhist monk, Athuraliye Rathana, in front of the historic Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, calling for the sacking of some Muslim ministers coupled with rising crowd mobilisation and public protests, led to the resignation of all nine Muslim ministers from their cabinet portfolios (Bastian and Marshal, 2019).

The Buddhist extremist violence which took place with some level of state complicity in 2019 presents a challenge to the thesis in this chapter as it occurred during the rule of a minority-friendly coalition government elected to reverse the democratic decline caused by their predecessors. Importantly, serious violations of minority rights and the minimal protection to Muslims were accorded during the rule of this coalition government, which was indeed incongruous given their reputation on this issue and their early policies in support of justice for war affected ethnic and religious groups. I would argue that there were two main reasons for this discrepancy. The first was that in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks evidence pointed to an intelligence failure and a breakdown between the coalition as being responsible for failing to prevent the attack (ICG, 2019). Relations between President Sirisena and his Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe were dysfunctional and Sirisena, aware of the threat to his rule and his increasing unpopularity, took these populist measures to attempt to win over the Buddhist majority voter base. The second argument I want to posit builds on the work of Singh (2014) who critiques most scholarly work for ‘assumptions that central authority is definitive for authoritarian states.’ Through research in Laos, Singh discusses ‘ritual governance’ where state-sponsored Buddhist rituals were used to maintain a coercive hierarchy. Though not through forms of religious rituals in previous research, I have found that power shifts that occurred in central government were not similarly reflected in the village structures (De Silva, Fonseka and Mihlar, 2019). In these peripheral political landscapes authoritarian power structures and what Glasius (2018) refers to as ‘authoritarian practices’ were difficult to dismantle and affiliation to autocrats continued to be periodically rekindled through patronage politics. A study in the villages bordering Sri Lanka’s conflict zone found the structures, practices and relationships the Rajapaksas had in place remained and were latently active (De Silva, Fonseka and Mihlar, 2019).

The period of autocratization under the Rajapaksas was intimately associated with Buddhist nationalist extremism; governed by its ideology, supported by its forces and in turn fuelled by political and financial power from the centre (DeVotta, 2018). This was a symbiotic relationship as the protagonists were distinct but shared a common ideological basis of Buddhist nationalism and a mutually beneficial agenda, pursued where necessary through the use of violence. The Rajapaksas’ politics taps into, thrives on and rekindles the ‘deep hegemony’ of Buddhist nationalism (Rampton, 2011) in the larger Buddhist population, most often together with, but when necessary independent of, Buddhist nationalist extremist groups. Both see Muslims as a threat to Buddhist nationalist objectives and have successfully constructed the minority group as an enemy of the Buddhist nation. Autocratization, however, requires a threat to the security of the state in addition to the commonly shared goal of Buddhist nationhood, which Muslims en masse were charged with following the Easter Sunday attacks.

Easter Sunday attacks – the aftermath

Buddhist extremist groups used the Easter Sunday bombings to validate their claims regarding Muslims and took the opportunity to galvanise and target Muslims more publicly. The threat of Islamic extremism, which was now seen as inseparable from Islam itself, was presented as a threat both to the security of the state and of the Buddhist nation and therefore had to be addressed. Meeting this purported new security threat and strengthening the Buddhist claim for nationhood required a different political leadership and when elections were called in late 2019 there was little doubt that the return of the Rajapaksas was imminent.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his party were elected on a majority Buddhist vote in the parliamentary elections of 2020 (DeVotta, 2021), significantly for the first time in the recent history of Sri

Lanka without the support of the minorities. Though some alliances with minority politicians were attempted in the run-up to both elections, both campaigns targeted and emerged victorious on the vote of the Buddhist majority. In a speech during his swearing in ceremony, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa acknowledged the lack of minority support for his victory, promised to provide state support to keep Sinhala and Buddhism at the helm of the country's culture but guaranteed the maintenance of religious and cultural identity of minority groups (Francis, 2019). Conspicuously he made this speech standing beside the statue of King Duttu Gemunu, considered to be one of Sri Lanka's greatest Buddhist monarchs for brutally defeating a South Indian Tamil ruler and under whose rule Buddhism flourished (Francis, 2019). A few months into his presidency, Gotabaya appointed a new committee to re-investigate the Easter Sunday bombings suggesting there was more evidence implicating Muslims with the terror threat.

Though this chapter classifies the autocratic tendencies of both Rajapaksa brothers as similar, as political rulers they have differences that need acknowledgement. Mahinda Rajapaksa has a far longer history of politics having served as a member of parliament since 1970. Even though his presidency was marked by a shift to autocracy and repression of political dissent and civil society during much of his own political career, particularly in opposition he was a left-wing campaigner for human rights, ironically one of the biggest critiques and opponents of Premadasa's authoritarianism. Gotabaya Rajapaksa on the other hand has a military background, spent part of his life in the United States and promotes capitalistic economic policies (DeVotta, 2021). Whilst Mahinda is considered more politically astute, works with and through networks of political actors at the local level and partakes in parliamentary politics; Gotabaya rules in a more centralised way with a small number of trusted individuals, in a regimental manner with the military enjoying more prominence. During his brother's presidency, Gotabaya Rajapaksa had a more significant role than Mahinda to play in the military onslaught that ended the war, in the gross violations of human rights and in supporting the ascendancy and dominance of Buddhist violent extremism (De Votta, 2021, 2018).

Forced cremation of Covid-19 dead

This chapter argues that the present shift to autocracy in Sri Lanka is conjoined with Buddhist nationalist extremism. In spite of differences between the autocratic regimes of Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, they are both bound to Buddhist nationalist extremism with the current president seen to be more hard line (De Votta, 2018). Both autocratization and Buddhist nationalist extremism share the common agenda of consolidating Buddhist nationhood and the objective of giving Buddhism supremacy within the organs, culture and society of the nation-state. Consequentially, the autonomy and role within the state of other religious groups must be limited, especially when they are considered a threat to Buddhist nationhood.

To illustrate this point further, this chapter will analyze the case study of Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government's 2020 policy enabling only cremation as an option for disposal of Covid-19 dead bodies, which unexpectedly materialised through a change in regulation by the Ministry of Health when the first Muslim Covid-19 death was recorded on 1 April 2020 (Joint Civil Society Statement, 2021). The policy adversely affected Muslims for whom burial is a strict religious criteria (Saroor, 2021; Mihlar, 2021). Additionally, from April to December 2020, nearly half of the bodies cremated were those of Muslims, some of whom had not contracted the virus but were suspected of having done so (Saroor, 2021; Mihlar, 2021). World Health Organization guidelines stating that burial of Covid-19 dead poses no potential risk of spreading the virus were dismissed by government claims that Sri Lanka possesses a higher water table, increasing the risk of contamination. Pressure internationally from the likes of the

UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and nationally from civil society and religious leaders calling for the policy to be revoked was disregarded (Joint Civil Society Statement, 2021). As Muslim victims rejected cremation, bodies were forcibly taken away from homes causing immense suffering to families and terrifying the rest of the community who feared the possibility of cremation (Saroor, 2021; Mihlar, 2021).

The forcible cremation policy is a pertinent and strong example of the return to autocracy. Not only was it pursued against international and national expert scientific advice, including from an 11-member task force of eminent virologists and microbiologists appointed by the Ministry of Health in December 2020, whose report was later denied (Mihlar, 2021), but Judicial and to a lesser extent legislative scrutiny of the policy was also limited. On 4 December 2020, the country's Supreme Court denied leave to proceed with a fundamental rights petition filed by 11 individuals claiming their constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of religion was being violated by the policy. A civil resistance campaign of tying white cloths at crematoriums and public spaces following the forcible cremation of a 20-day-old baby, was disbanded by police and numerous civil society statements on the matter were ignored. Parliamentary scrutiny had some effect; repeated questioning of the procedure by a few opposition and minority members led to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa calling for the December expert review and eventually stating in parliament on 10 February 2021 that burial will be permitted. Gotabaya however remained silent on the matter, indicative of the dissimilar forms of autocratization pursued by the two brothers.

The eventual reversal of the policy came following a visit by Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, whose visit was aimed at diverting Sri Lanka away from Indian influence towards that of China. Khan publicly invited Sri Lanka to join the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), whilst privately urging the Rajapaksas to do away with the forced cremation policy (newsin.asia, 2021). Khan's intervention came as international pressure on the Rajapaksas reached a critical point with Sri Lanka facing a new resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), following the expiry of the previous one calling for accountability for war time atrocities and reconciliation. Sri Lanka in 2015 supported this resolution but Gotabaya Rajapaksa had much earlier signalled he would withdraw support for it and the Rajapaksas needed to act swiftly to defuse rising anger by states belonging to the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), most of whom have previously stood by Sri Lanka in the UNHRC. Irrespective of the external persuasion, the undermining of democratic structures and civil society in this particular case was palpable.

The initial resolve by the government to maintain a discriminatory policy, despite international pressure, was in line with its shared ideology and objective with Buddhist nationalist extremism (Mihlar, 2021). Campaigners working on this issue, interviewed by the author, have explained how representatives of Buddhist extremist groups have held that the policy of cremating Covid-19 dead aligned with their goal of one law for all Sri Lankans and in addition a few have claimed that Muslims could use Covid-19 dead bodies as biological weapons. Such comments and views originating from members and supporters of Buddhist extremist groups were also popularised on social media. Strikingly, however, towards the end of 2020, a few prominent monks, including the BBS leader, called on the government to reconsider their policy based on expert advice (lankanewsweb.net, 2020). This demonstrates that even though conjoined by a common aim as explained in this article, Buddhist nationalist extremism and autocracy can have auxiliary political interests that may diverge at different times, perhaps based on constituency demands. Such divergence is usually only temporary and often superficial. In this case too Prime Minister Rajapaksa, reportedly, only publicly announced the government's decision to allow burials after consulting Buddhist monks (newsinasia.com, 2021).

The policy of cremating all persons infected with and suspected of having Covid-19 provides an important case study in explaining the relationship between autocratization and Muslims. Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected largely on the vote of the Buddhist majority to ensure the physical security of the Buddhist population and the protection of the Buddhist nation-state. Together with his Buddhist nationalist extremist allies he sees Muslims as an enemy, but for the purposes of strengthening autocratization he needs to additionally maintain a threat to the security of the state. The Easter Sunday attacks made this briefly possible, but in the absence of an organised enemy similar to the LTTE, Rajapaksa needed to maintain the perception of threat. The repeat investigations of the bombings in part were to achieve this and then the pandemic provided a new opportunity where Muslims, even in death, were construed as a threat to public health. The persistence of a threat calls for the defeat of the enemy through, for example, the vehement pursuit of the cremation policy which results in the intimidation of and damage to Muslims.

Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resolve even momentarily without the support of Buddhist extremists suggests not only that the goal of building a Buddhist nationalist state and suppressing minorities is critical to autocracy, independent of its relationship to Buddhist violent extremism, but also that sustaining Muslims as the threat is vital for the survival of autocratization. Some have argued that rising frustration among Muslim youth over this policy may lead to extremism, validating claims of a threat and providing the autocrat with the credibility required to further oppress Muslims through more extreme measures (Economynext, 2021). This last factor augments the argument made in this chapter on autocratization using Muslims to maintain a sense of threat whilst simultaneously damaging them in order to be perceived as 'dealing with the enemy.'

The Muslim response

Forming conclusions of Muslims' response to this latest turn is difficult considering its full effects on the community are yet to be seen, hence this analysis is based on autocratization in Sri Lanka since 2009. Wachtel (2013) posits that marginalisation of minorities is more acute in democratic rather than authoritarian states in Central Asia; since authoritarian leaders are unelected they do not need to 'rally the majority population around ideas of the nation.' In the Sri Lankan case, as democratic processes were used to usher in the autocratic regime, the majority population was indeed rallied around the idea of electing a strong leader who can promote and protect the Buddhist nation. Autocratization in Sri Lanka closely resembles 'neopatrimonial authoritarianism' which uses systems of patronage to ensure and sustain loyalties through influential networks (Ilkhamov, 2007). This patronage politics sustained loyalty through the 2015–2020 change in government and manifests both at the central and local levels. The democratic process complicates this system of patronage which is accorded to both the head of government and the local MP; at times, especially in the case of minority politics, this can be competitive. The patronage that some stalwart Muslim MPs command exists irrespective of the MP's own political patronage; whichever political grouping the MP decides to align with. This results in the frequent creation and destruction of alliances based on disparate reasoning ranging from protection of the group to individual wealth accumulation.

Beyond using their vote to prevent autocratization, Muslims have publicly done little to challenge it. A few political and civil society activists and victim groups have been critical of the Rajapaksa's policies and practices, but often cautiously. During Mahinda Rajapaksa's rule some Muslim political and civil society representatives condemned the state's complicity with Buddhist nationalist extremism, especially when it resulted in violence. However, as I have

previously discussed, Muslim community and religious leaders privately held that the community had not behaved as a minority group (Mihlar, 2019). These elites took deliberate measures to withdraw the externalisation of religious symbols and practices and hold back Muslim youth from retaliating to the religious violence. Their response was starkly submissive. On the issue of forced cremation there has been more public outcry by Muslim activists and commentators and few statements by political representatives, but here too their reaction can be described as subdued.

Fumagalli (2007) uses Gorenburg's (2003) definition of frames as 'interpretive schemes that condense and simplify a person's experience by selectively highlighting and encoding certain situations, objects, events and experiences' (2003:11) to explain the limited ethnic mobilisation in authoritarian regimes in Soviet-era central Asia. According to Fumagalli (2007: 568; 570) 'Frames do not emerge naturally, but are an essential tool used by political elites to mobilise or demobilise the broader community' and 'operate as the interface between background structural factors and the contingent choices of the elites.' Muslims in Sri Lanka as the second largest minority have always had to navigate between the two conflicting dominant ethnic groups – Tamils and Sinhalese. Muslim political elites have fought to establish an ethnic, religious identity distinct from these groups, but have also led the community to cooperate, particularly with the majority Sinhalese rulers. As Farzana Haniffa (2016) has stated, Muslims have held on to the reputation of being 'the good minority' unlike the Tamils who preferred secession. Muslim political and religious elites, in the face of religious violence, held fast onto this framing of shying away from resistance, avoiding confrontation and conflict. Following the Easter Sunday attacks violence and hate campaigns against Muslims increased, but Muslims were restrained, desperate to disown and isolate from the bombers and working with state forces, in spite of rising distrust due to the lack of protection, to cooperate and enable 'counter-extremism.' In my research in Kottarumulla, in the north-western province and Aluthgama in the south, Muslim youth have spoken in detail of their frustration and resentment with police and army who were complicit in the attacks stating that they were firmly restrained by community elders and religious leaders from responding.

The inhibited mobilisation of Muslims must be understood through this historical internal framing and the more recent external framing associating the group with extremism and terrorism. As the smaller minority Muslims have witnessed how extremism and terrorism among the larger minority, Tamils, was dealt with by the state, which will be avoided at all costs.

Conclusion

This chapter began by placing the current phase of autocratization in historical context and illustrated how such periods have emerged and developed based on elites leveraging a security threat to the state and mobilising popular sentiment to garner support so they can maintain their position. Previous autocratization, including the last which the current president was part of, was bolstered by dealing with such 'threats' with severity leading to mass atrocities. The chapter proceeds to argue that Sri Lanka's present shift to autocratization is conjoined with Buddhist nationalist extremism, sharing a common ideology and objective of congealing a Buddhist nation-state. This was also the case in the previous authoritarian turn, which Gotabaya Rajapaksa was integral to. Following the end of the armed conflict, Muslims were framed as the 'new enemy' posing a threat to both the physical security of the majority and the objective of achieving a Buddhist nation-state.

Utilising the case study of the government's April 2020 policy to permit only the cremation of Covid-19 dead, this article explains the relationship between Muslims and autocratization

as one where the latter is maintained as a threat and attacked as an enemy. This subjugation of Muslims, which occurs even without the support of Buddhist nationalist extremism, indicates that consolidating the Buddhist nation-state and oppressing minorities is an independent goal of autocracy. The nature of relations between Muslims and this phase of autocratization will not remain static. As other challenges to the rule of the autocrat emerge, Muslim political elites may be wooed; such use and disposal, as previous patterns have shown, is part of dealing with the enemy. Muslims are necessary for this present form of autocratization, hence they cannot be annihilated but subjugating them is critical for the survival of autocratization. This can be achieved through the production of perceived and real physical threat to Buddhists and through working with Buddhist extremist groups on hate campaigns and violent means to eradicate the threat to the objective of Buddhist nationhood. The prevalence and progression of autocratization in Sri Lanka thereby threatens not only democratic, liberal values but also minority protection and rights, which in the post-war context have serious implications for conflict prevention and reconciliation.

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