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Sri Lanka

Reframing the riots

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The recent riots targeting Muslims in Kandy have provoked accusations on many sides. While mainstream conversations focus on what the riots entail in terms of immediate political consequences for the current Government and its tepid response, progressives have also had to reckon with the growing presence of anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence as a feature of contemporary Sri Lankan life.

Many advocates in liberal civil society attempt to get to the root cause by arguing that Sinhala Buddhists have a sense of entitlement and ownership of Sri Lanka. This argument was a framing device, for example, during a recent panel discussion on Al-Jazeera on the impact of the riots.

Progressives may sympathise with the attempt to push back against the idea that the recent riots are a symmetrical conflict involving extremists “on both sides”. The danger, however, is that the assumption of an unchanging Sinhala Buddhist mentality may fall back into many of the same kinds of culturalist arguments that were ineffectively promoted during the civil war to explain animus toward Tamils. Progressives may yet again be unknowingly ceding ground to Sinhala nationalists, accepting their ethno-religious framing of conflict.

The history of Sinhala nationalism

Instead, placing more of an emphasis on discontinuity and rupture in the history of Sinhala nationalism may enable progressives to creatively rethink solutions to collective problems, especially by paying attention to the shifts in nationalist ideology. For example, the recent violence has brought back references to the riots of 1915 as an example of one long continuous campaign to target Muslims. It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the changing historical context.

In her book ‘Nobodies to Somebodies,’ historian Kumari Jayawardena implied that the riots of 1915 were an example of upwardly mobile members of castes, such as the karava, coming into conflict with the colonial state; their growing assertiveness involving leadership for attacks on other groups. In an earlier article, she also pointed to the role of the urban working class on the southwestern coast, and the fact that anti-minority sentiment arose primarily out of fears of economic competition with migrants, rather than direct opposition to religious symbols, such as attacks on mosques.

The current situation, however, is different, insofar as the class composition of people involved in the recent riots appears to be the underemployed, petty shop owners, and others composing the mob. Many of these people may have been impacted by the decades-long process of market liberalisation and the rising cost of living in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, in terms of the class situation alone, we can begin to identify different groups within the Sinhala community that were involved in the most recent phase of rioting.

More abstractly, there appear to be four components of the ideological justification for the scope and generalisation of the recent attacks: 1) claims that Muslims will outnumber the Sinhala due to faster population growth, in addition to sterilisation conspiracies, 2) unfair economic competition, 3) the incompatibility of Muslim cultural practices with those of the general population (particularly the treatment of women), and 4) dubious allegiances to the nation-state.

In each case, these same tropes have been applied to Tamils, Christians, and other groups at other times. As

Tisarane Gunasekara noted in a recent article, for example, arguments expressing fear of population increase have been made against Tamils in the past; similarly, claims about economic competition; paranoia about forced conversions that undermine Buddhism has targeted Christians; and, of course, many still imply that Tamils are not loyal, instead representing the “Eelam vote”.

Thus, in addition to focusing on targets, we must try and identify the mechanisms which have been used to ideologically justify claims against Muslims, insofar as they have been applied to other groups as well. Moreover, this perspective undercuts, for example, the more recent Sinhala nationalist argument that “we never really had a cultural problem with Tamils.”

Alternatives to nationalism

Analysing these issues goes back to the premise of this article, the question of whether the riots are an example of an ingrained Sinhala Buddhist mentality, or in fact reflect a history of ideological and political reconfiguration.

If we look at it from the latter perspective, we can start to think of ways to redefine the question of inter-ethnic and, more recently, inter-communal harmony away from the fatalist assumption that the Sri Lankan state inherently prioritises Sinhala Buddhists over others. Instead, we could envision citizenship as a right that must be asserted against structures of power both within communitiesâ€”to take into consideration, for example, Muslim progressives’ concerns about issues such as genderâ€”and on a national scale.

Could there be other ways of generating responses to the riots that speak to the impulses, fears, and anxieties behind the issues outlined above? Could we ask instead: why are Sinhala, Muslim, and Tamil families experiencing economic dislocation; why are people forced to migrate for work; why are religious institutions the dominant mode of organising cultural life, as opposed to alternatives, such as trade unions; and why does the state severely repress popular protest, except in the case of racist mobs?

In different ways, many progressives have tried to speak to these questions by re-framing conflict beyond narrowly ethnicised terms, while still recognising the damage that has historically been inflicted upon Tamil and Muslim communities. The idea that militarisation inevitably affects all communities, for example, was central to earlier critiques during the war. In thinking about the ways in which the current debate is being framed, these perspectives urgently need to be highlighted and reasserted; before the ethno-religious framing and its liberal counter-response takes over, leading us back into an organising dead-end. In addition, we need analysis of ways in which more recent trends provoke anti-Muslim attacks: from Trumpism and the electoral success of far-right populists around the world, to the failure in Sri Lanka to create a progressive constituency for egalitarian change, both in constitutional and economic terms, during the current transition period.

Generating support

The connections between these questions need to be identified. The danger though is that in the rush to condemn the rioting, progressive responses might reproduce inadequacies that have previously undermined liberal civil society’sâ€”and before that, the labour and left movement’sâ€”attempts to push back against racism. The responses to the attacks on Muslims must be swift. At the same time, it behoves us to avoid relying on arguments that assume Sinhala nationalism is an ahistorical phenomenon, or are otherwise ineffective in generating mass support for anti-racist action.

Reframing the riots

Perhaps most relevant to the question of progressive strategy is that the flip side of many of these argumentsâ€”that rioting will create “another LTTE” in the Muslim communityâ€”is fundamentally flawed. There are other ways of looking at potential conflict. For example, ghettoisation and its counterpart, civil rights struggle.

The resistance of a Muslim community under siege may not necessarily be expressed in the form of territorial separatism. The spectre of Salafist terrorism dominates the global imagination, but in the case of Sri Lanka, Muslim responses could involve demands for inclusion and egalitarianism. This process depends on debates that are happening within the community, and whether those concerns are incorporated into a wider progressive campaign.

The first challenge is to reframe the debate about the recent riots, even while Kandy smoulders. Failure to do so will only encourage those who look forward to more violence. They know that condemnation in the press cannot stop them while they hold the initiative on the ground.

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