Religious Radicalization in Sri Lanka: The Interaction Between Buddhist and Islamic Radicalization and Its Impact on Social Life

ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine Buddhist and Islamic radicalization in Sri Lanka, focusing on how Buddhist radicalization preceded Islamic radicalization and its impact on the social cohesion and politics of the country. The study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, analysing data from relevant literature, political documents, religious texts, and media reports. The analysis was conducted using a thematic approach to identify key patterns related to ethnic identity, religious politics, and inter-religious tensions. The research findings indicate that the radicalization of Buddhism, rooted in the ideology of Sinhala-Buddhism, has generated social tensions that have worsened relations between Buddhists and Muslims, which, in turn, has fueled radicalization within the Muslim community. The rise of the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ) in response to anti-Muslim violence is a clear example of Islamic radicalization triggered by the politicization of religion and the injustice faced by Muslims in Sri Lanka. This study highlights how the radicalization of majority religions can create fertile ground for the radicalization of minority religions. The implications of this research offer important insights into how religious radicalization can exacerbate social and political polarization in a multi-ethnic country. The research also suggests the importance of inclusive policies and interfaith dialogue to reduce sectarian tensions and promote social peace. The originality of this research lies in its deeper understanding of the relationship between Buddhist and Islamic radicalization in Sri Lanka, an area that has been previously underexplored, and its contribution to the study of religious radicalization in a unique local context.

Keywords: Religious Radicalization; Political Buddhism; Anti-Muslim Violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism and Islam have coexisted in Sri Lanka for over a thousand years (Musa, 2015), with Buddhism arriving in the 3rd century BC (Berkwitz, 2012) and Islam in the 8th century AD (Raheem, 2024). For most of that time, the two religions coexisted peacefully, influencing the cultural and political life of the country. However, this peace began to be disrupted in the second half of the 20th

century, particularly with the rise of ethnic and religious nationalism. Buddhism, which had traditionally been involved in political life in Sri Lanka, began to become more politically active during this period. This change coincided with the emergence of Tamil nationalism and the strengthening of Sinhalese ethnic nationalism, which led to the politicization of Buddhism. In the 1970s and 1980s, radical Buddhist groups even forged alliances with rebels (DeVotta, 2007). In this new phase, the role of Buddhism becomes more visible in the political sphere, being more active outside the temples.

Meanwhile, Islam also experienced a process of politicization beginning in the late 20th century (Mihlar, 2019). The rise of Muslim political parties, driven by a new generation of ambitious Muslim politicians, marked a shift from the pragmatic approach of previous Muslim leaders. This new strategy aimed to unite the Muslim vote under one political party, with significant political consequences. While successful in consolidating the Muslim vote, it inadvertently fueled the growth of radical elements within the Muslim community, leading to increased extremism and detrimental effects on social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

This political shift, in which Buddhist radicalization preceded Islamic radicalization, offers an interesting comparative study. The rise of Buddhist radicalization can be seen as a precursor to Islamic radicalization, a phenomenon some scholars refer to as the radicalization contradiction. Both processes are deeply intertwined with broader political dynamics in Sri Lanka, highlighting the role of religion in shaping national identity and governance. The relationship between these two forms of religious radicalization is particularly relevant today, as Sri Lanka's social fabric is increasingly defined by religious and ethnic divisions. Understanding the stages and causes of this radicalization is crucial to addressing issues of national unity, religious tolerance, and political stability.

Previous research on the politicization of religion in Sri Lanka has provided valuable insights into the relationship between Buddhism, Islam, and politics. Studies by scholars such as Imtiyaz, (2014) and Deegalle, (2016) examined the role of Buddhism in Sri Lankan politics, while other research, including works by Imtiyaz & Mohamed-Saleem, (2024), Klem, (2011) and Meeran, (2020), explored the rise of Islamic political movements in the region. However, the existing literature generally focuses on either Buddhism or Islam separately, often neglecting the role of both religions in the broader political context. Moreover, while the relationship between religious radicalization and ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka has been discussed in some studies, (e.g., Gravers, 2015; Sarjoon et al., 2016; Morrison, 2020), the chronological development of Buddhist radicalization influencing Islamic radicalization has not been sufficiently explored.

Moreover, many studies do not examine the social and political consequences of the rise of both Buddhist and Islamic radicalization in Sri Lanka. The literature often only addresses the religious dimension of radicalization, without looking at how these developments interact with other factors such as ethnicity, governance, and international influences. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding of public perceptions of these radical movements and their impact on interfaith relations in the country.

This research seeks to address gaps identified in previous literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the processes of Buddhist and Islamic

radicalization in Sri Lanka, focusing on the rise of Buddhist radicalization that preceded Islamic radicalization. By examining these two religious movements in the context of ethnic and national identity, this research will provide a deeper understanding of how religious radicalization affects the political landscape in Sri Lanka. The aim of this study is to trace the historical development of these radical movements, analyze their impact on social and political cohesion, and highlight the underlying factors that drive this phenomenon.

This study hypothesises that the process of politicization and radicalization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka not only preceded but also contributed to, the emergence of radicalization in parts of the Muslim community in reaction to the symbolic and political domination of the majority religion. Since the mid-20th century, Buddhism began to be closely associated with Sinhalese ethnic nationalism, creating a symbolic exclusion of the Muslim community that was increasingly marginalised from the national identity. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979), the strengthening of the dominant group's identity in the context of conflict tends to result in the formation of a counter-identity of the marginalised group. In this case, Sri Lankan Muslims began to respond to the socio-political pressure by strengthening their faith-based political representation, which in some cases developed into a form of radicalism. This process suggests a dialectical relationship between Buddhist majoritarianism and the emergence of Islamic radicalization, as also described by Huntington (1997) in his theory of the clash of civilisations, where religion is used as a key marker in identity conflicts that go beyond mere expressions of faith. In addition, the symbolic conflict approach (Gravers, 2015) also shows that religious symbols are often mobilised as tools of power in political competition. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the historical and political linkages between these two radicalization processes and evaluate their impact on social cohesion, inter-religious relations and political stability in Sri Lanka.

METHOD

This research focuses on religious radicalization, specifically the radicalization of Buddhism and Islam in Sri Lanka. The main units of analysis are the religious groups and ideologies involved in this radicalization, both from the majority (Buddhism) and minority (Islam) sides, and their impact on social and political cohesion in the country. The research also examines how religious radicalization has affected interfaith relations, as well as ethnic and national identities in Sri Lanka. This research uses a qualitative research design (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Maher & Dertadian, 2018) with a case study approach (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2011). This approach was chosen because the aim was to understand in depth the social, political and religious dynamics underlying radicalization in the Sri Lankan context. Qualitative methods allow researchers to explore richer insights (Levy, 2006) into the role of religion in politics, ethnic identity, and broader social impacts, as well as to analyse more complex data that is difficult to quantify. In addition, qualitative designs allow for a deeper understanding (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) of public perceptions and factors influencing radicalization, which cannot be answered with statistical data alone.

The data used in this research was sourced from various types of information, including secondary data obtained from literature, historical reports, journal articles and books on religious radicalization, ethnic nationalism and Sri Lankan politics. In addition, primary data was also drawn through analysis of relevant documents, such as political speeches, religious publications, other textual sources, and media reports related to radicalization. These data sources provide insight into the impact of religious radicalization on society and national identity in Sri Lanka. Data collection was conducted through document analysis and literature review (Khoa, Hung, & Brahmi, 2023). In this case, the researcher collected and analyzed various documents, including political speeches, religious declarations, articles, and media reports related to the radicalization process of Buddhism and Islam in Sri Lanka. The research also drew on previous studies and analyses of political texts that illustrate the role of religion in shaping political policy as well as interfaith interactions in Sri Lanka.

The collected data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019). This technique allowed the researcher to identify key patterns in the data, such as perceptions of national identity, religious politics, and the impact of radicalization on interfaith relations. The analysis was conducted by categorizing the data into major themes that emerged during data collection and then drawing conclusions that provide insights into the relationship between the radicalization of Buddhism and Islam in the Sri Lankan context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Rise of Political Buddhism and its Role in Shaping Ethnoreligious Identity in Sri Lanka

In the 1940s, United National Party (UNP) leader and Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister, D. S. Senanayake, along with another party member, J. R. Jayewardena, criticised the monks of Vidyalankara Privena for engaging in political campaigns and supporting Trotskyite and Communist platforms (Abeysekara, 1999; Tambiah, 1992). In response, these monks defended themselves by stating that it was part of their historical heritage to be actively involved in various social and political spheres of Sri Lankan society. One of the scholar monks, Yakkaduwa Sri Pragnarama Nayaka Thera, drafted the Vidyalankara Privena Declaration which stated that Sri Lanka was 'essentially a Buddhist country' and that monks should identify with political activity (Ali, 2014). This statement signalled that monks' involvement in politics was not new, but part of a long-standing legacy in their tradition.

Furthermore, the concept of 'political monks' was introduced by the scholar monk Walpola Rahula through his 1946 book Bhiksuwage Urumaya (The Monk's Legacy). The book gave legitimacy to Buddhist politics, elevating monks as an integral part of Sri Lankan political life. Although Buddhist politics had been politicized before, especially in the nationalist struggle against British colonialism and foreign commercial interests, Rahula's book clearly affirmed the importance of monks' role in politics.

Prior to the 1940s, Anagarika Dharmapala, a former Christian who converted to Buddhism, had identified the Sri Lankan state with Buddhism and introduced the term Sinhala-Buddhist in a 'racial-religious' context (Obeyesekere, 2017). He led a xenophobic campaign in the early 20th century targeting the Muslim community, known as the first anti-Muslim campaign in Sri Lanka. Dharmapala even labelled all Muslims in the country as foreigners who should be driven back to Arabia, a sentiment still heard today among radical Buddhist groups (Gamage, 2021). This campaign led to the first riots between Sinhalese and Muslims in 1915, demonstrating how Buddhist and Sinhalese identities were closely intertwined and politicized.

In 1956, another Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, realised the great potential of political Buddhism in winning parliamentary elections. In the 1956 General Election, his newly founded party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, teamed up with Philip Gunawardena's Viplavakari Lanka Sama Samaja Party, forming the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) coalition with a Buddhist image. The most powerful soldiers recruited for this campaign were Sangha members, numbering around 12,000, who are considered to have words sacred to more than five million people. As veteran journalist Tarzie Vittachi wrote, 'Here was the best election agent a politician could have - 12,000 people whose word is sacred to more than 5,000,000 people, campaigning to bring down the Government, with vigour and at no cost' (Vittachi, 1958). The election resulted in a landslide victory for the MEP coalition. The huge role played by the monks in the election attracted the attention of even the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which saw the huge potential of Buddhism in the imperialist war against Communism in Southeast Asia.

Although Bandaranaike was later assassinated by the ethno-religious forced he deliberately nurtured, the 1956 election set the trend for the future role of Buddhism and monks in Sri Lankan politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, the politicization of Buddhism became more radical, especially during the two rebellions when monks or "venerable sirs", as the rebels called them, joined the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or People's Liberation Front to save the motherland from the designs of Indian imperialism and Western capitalism. James Jupp, a political scientist, calls the JVP 'the true child of the 1956 victors'. Although President Jayewardena tried to keep the monks in a "non-political" form after 1977, more and more of them became involved in politics, and hundreds of monks were killed by the security forces during the insurgency. According to Victor Ivan, an experienced journalist and eyewitness to both uprisings, "Both uprisings had links to temples, and temples became a safe haven for the rebels to hide their weapons. Nearly 500 Bhikkhus were arrested in the '71 rebellion, the number of Bhikkhus killed in the second rebellion could be more than 500." Once Buddhism was politicized, it didn't take long for the ideology to become radicalized.

However, the most significant factor that made Buddhism and monks integral to electoral and party politics in Sri Lanka after the 1950s was the rise of Tamil nationalism with its demand for a federal system of government. This demand was triggered by the MEP Government's "Sinhalese Only" Bill in 1956, which led to a split between Sinhalese and Tamils, sparked anti-Tamil riots, radicalized Tamil youth, militarised the country, and evolved into a thirty-year civil war that ended in a tragic defeat for the Tamils, and remains unresolved today.

Although the Tamil issue is not directly relevant to this discussion, the question of power sharing with minorities is at the core of radicalized Buddhism. It is around this question of who owns the country that today's radical Buddhist groups are increasingly polarised. Rahula had already answered that question emphatically in 1996, when he said, "Sri Lanka is a Sinhala Buddhist country" (Raghavan, 2012). Let no one misunderstand, it was this question and answer that radicalized Buddhist groups during the civil war, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fought for an independent state. This radicalization did not stop after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, but instead entered a new phase that responded to another political phenomenon, namely Muslim identity politics and politicized Islam.

Just as the Sinhala-Buddhist identity strengthened, the relationship between Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Buddhism became central to the country's ethnic problems. While Sinhalese Buddhists regard Sri Lanka as their "only home", which they consider "alienated", Tamils, on the other hand, assert that they are one of the island's two "founding races" entitled to a share in the country's governance. The question of who owns the country was raised again on 7 June 2019, in the context of tensions between Buddhism and Muslims, when a monk, Ven. Gnanasara Thera, made a speech at a public rally in Kandy city (Ali, 2019b). He wanted Tamils and Muslims to accept that Buddhists own Sri Lanka and hinted that both minority communities are long-term tenants. Essentially, the radicalization of Buddhism is an overt manifestation of the call for Buddhist supremacy. Although the Tamil issue remains unresolved, the politicization of Islam and the rise of identity politics among Muslims adds a new dimension to ethno-nationalism and fuels radical Buddhist groups to take on a new enemy.

2. Islamic Identity Politics and the Formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Party

Islam in Sri Lanka only became politicized after the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Party (SLMC) in 1986 (Yusoff, Sarjoon, Hussin, & Ahmad, 2017). Prior to this, Muslims in Sri Lanka had very limited political involvement, mostly focusing on business and commercial activities. The community mostly viewed politics as irrelevant, with a strictly religious worldview that had been maintained for centuries by orthodox scholars through mosques and madrassas. However, with the introduction of a directly elected parliamentary system after independence, a Muslim elite of businessmen and landowners entered politics and managed to secure seats in parliament. However, even when elected, their political loyalties depended on how much they could gain for their communities from national leaders. Inter-party rivalry among the Sinhalese and inter-community divisions between Sinhalese and Tamils created a conducive climate for the business-orientated Muslim leadership to bargain for positions and privileges from the winning party (Ali, 1986).

However, this situation suffered a setback in 1978, when the Jayewardena Government imposed a presidential system referred to as the "Gaullist" system with proportional parliamentary representation (Wilson, 1980). This new system raised concerns in some quarters of the Muslim community that their representation in parliament would be greatly reduced, which was one of

Jayewardena's objectives. To address this shortcoming, a group of educated youth from the Muslim-dense areas of Southeast Sri Lanka decided to launch the SLMC under the leadership of a lawyer, M. H. M. Ashraff. There were several reasons why this group formed the party. One was the rising tensions in the 1980s between Tamil rebel groups and Muslims in the North and East of Sri Lanka. There was also an alleged lack of understanding and concern among many existing Muslim parliamentarians for the particular problems faced by Muslims in the Eastern Province, the majority of whom are farmers.

The SLMC can also be seen as a product of Muslim provincialism. However, the main reason that led to the formation of the SLMC was the need to maintain Muslim unity. One of the founders of the SLMC, Abdul Cader Lebbe, a renowned poet and thinker, had views on the importance of Muslim unity in Sri Lanka. Lebbe's thinking was influenced by the experience of the Indian Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who although a secularist, led the struggle for Muslim rights without bowing to the wishes of Sinhalese and Tamil leaders. Although Lebbe did not want an independent state for Sri Lankan Muslims, he wanted a political organisation that could unite all Muslims under a secular leader who could fight for their rights.

Lebbe and Ashraff had a close relationship through regular visits to Matale, where Lebbe lived, as well as written correspondence since the late 1970s. Unfortunately, however, Lebbe's death in 1984, before the SLMC was officially established, could be considered a great loss for the development of the party (Ali, 2019a). At the same time, Farah Mihlar in discussing the impact of the SLMC's identity politics on Islam overlooks some important facts about the party that need to be emphasised to understand the extent to which Islam was politicized for electoral gain. Mihlar writes that although the SLMC's official position is that of a 'Muslim' party and not an Islamic party, 'the ideological position of the SLMC formation is in fact Islamist' and the party successfully developed a sense of communal identity throughout the 1990s through its engagement in Islamic politics. However, a more critical reading of SLMC literature and their political campaigns shows that the party deliberately exploited Islam for political gain, rather than just "occasionally engaging in Islamic politics."

Once the name 'Muslim' is incorporated into the party's identity, Islam is automatically implicated along with all its theological and practical underpinnings. The SLMC flag, for example, is green in colour and bears the words *'la ilaha illallah, Muhammad al-rasoolullah,'* which is the shahada sentence recited by every Muslim as a prerequisite for remaining a Muslim. The flag also contains crescent moon and tree symbols, which have several references in the Qur'an and are traditionally associated with Islam. This suggests that the party is strategically using religious symbols to build political support, especially among more religious Muslim groups such as the Tabligh Jamaat (TJ), a highly active da'wah movement.

In addition to these symbols, public campaigns organized by the SLMC also carry an air of religiosity, with Qur'anic readings at the beginning and end of meetings, as well as popular Islamic songs in the middle of events. Shouts of *Allahu Akbar* after speeches and quotations from the Qur'an and Hadith were part of the strategy to give religious legitimacy to the party leaders' arguments. The SLMC also portrayed its struggle as a form of jihad, a term that carries religious emotional

appeal. All this suggests that, until the tragic death of founding leader Ashraff in 2000, the politics of the SLMC was Islamist in thought and practice. Not surprisingly, many Muslim voters regarded the SLMC as the 'party of Allah' or Hizballah. Moreover, the fact that Ashraff wore a white hat during his legislative debut and began his speech with the Islamic shahada further emphasizes the Islamist agenda of his mission in politics.

3. Radicalization of Buddhist Supremacists and Anti-Muslim Violence in Sri Lanka

The year 2009 marked a pivotal point in Sri Lanka's long history, especially for Sinhala Buddhists. For the international community, it was the year of the total destruction of the LTTE militia by the combined forces of the army, navy and air force comprised mainly of Sinhala Buddhist soldiers. For Sinhalese Buddhists, however, the victory was more than just a war victory. For them, it dispelled a psychological fear that had threatened their mindset for centuries, especially after independence, when Tamils demanded a federal state. That fear was that Tamils from the North of the country, with the support of their neighbours across the Palk Strait, would one day capture Sri Lanka and subjugate the Sinhalese. This fear was also deliberately nurtured by Buddhist nationalists, including politicians, Sangha members, academics, historians and journalists, for political purposes. In 2009, this fear evaporated almost immediately when the Sinhalese realized that Tamil Nadu left the LTTE fighters alone in the middle of the war, and India chose to remain neutral in its own national interest. This victory further strengthened the belief that Sri Lanka belonged only to them, especially the Sinhalese Buddhists, and that other communities were allowed to live in the country only at the will of that majority.

The victory also reaffirmed the old question: 'Who owns this country?' This question resurfaced when President Mahinda Rajapakse in his victory speech declared that 'there will be no more Sinhalese, Tamils, or Muslims, only Sri Lankans.' This statement received a standing ovation from the listening crowd, but there was a strange silence amongst the Buddhist community indicating deep tensions regarding ethnic and religious identity in state ownership. Post-2009, Sri Lanka witnessed the emergence of radical Buddhist supremacist movements that took shape in various political and social configurations, such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya (SR), Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), and Ravana Balakaya (RB). Among these organizations, JHU is the most senior, having been formed in 2003 as a breakaway party from its parent body, Sinhala Urumaya (SU), which was founded in 2000 (DeVotta & Stone, 2008). This wave of supremacy can be described as a re-radicalization of Buddhism after the first wave of radicalization triggered by the JVP. However, these organizations are no longer attacking the government or foreigners, as the JVP did before, but rather the Muslim community.

These supremacist movements are strongly ethno-religious and nationalist in their thinking and aspirations. At least one of them, the BBS, has links with the radical Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha or 969 led by monk Ashin Wirathu in Myanmar. There have been reciprocal visits between the leaders of these two organizations, and the Rajapakse government gave a four-day warm welcome to Wirathu in

September 2014. As sociologist Tudor Silva points out, the BBS has transformed Sinhala Buddhist nationalism into a militant version of remote nationalism propagated through print, electronic and social media (Silva, 2016). Although there had previously been anti-Muslim riots such as those in Puttalam (1976), Galle (1982), and Mawanelle (2000), there was a difference in quality between the violence before 2009 and after (Anas, Amirdeen, & Waseel, 2008). The earlier violence was sporadic and not motivated by any particular threat from the Muslim community to the state. In contrast, the post-2009 violence was systematic and justified based on an imagined fear that Muslims, through unusually high birth rates, as well as unproven conspiratorial allegations of sterilisation of Sinhalese women and forced conversion to Islam, would turn Sri Lanka into a Muslim-majority country.

As Benjamin Schonthal believes, 'Buddhist nationalism requires the perception of a threat; and whether the threat is real or not, it must be created' (Schonthal, 2016).After defeating the Tamils, Buddhist radicals created a new threat from Muslims. In this context, the publication of a provocative book in Sinhala entitled Al-Qaeda's Al-Jihad, written by a cabinet minister, Patali Champika Ranawaka, who hails from the JHU, added credibility to this imagined threat. Before 2009, especially during the civil war years, despite sporadic unrest, neither the government nor the Sinhalese community could marginalize the Muslim community. This was partly because of the policy of division and governance adopted in the struggle against the LTTE and also because Sri Lanka feared damaging the relationship it had built with the Arab world over decades. This explains why when the LTTE leadership expelled some 75,000 Muslims from the North, and when thousands more fled the East due to LTTE violence, the refugees were allowed to settle peacefully in other provinces among the Sinhalese. This kindness and tolerance changed quickly after the civil war ended. For the radicals, Muslims were seen as a new threat to Buddhism and the state.

The issue of demographics has been used by radical groups to justify the radicalization of Buddhism against Muslims. The assumption that Muslims have a high birth rate and will replace Buddhists in Sri Lanka makes this a powerful weapon to stir up anti-Muslim sentiments among Sinhalese. Radicals claim that there is a structured effort to reduce the Buddhist birth rate by unproven means, such as the sale of women's underwear with contraceptives inserted or the serving of food containing similar ingredients to reduce Sinhalese births. These allegations have never been proven through laboratory tests and official investigations.

In addition, there were also allegations that halal certification for food sold in Sri Lanka discriminated against Sinhalese businesses. After several protests, this halal certification was eventually stopped. All these issues exacerbated tensions between Buddhists and Muslims, and Buddhist radicals began to take the law into their own hands. As a result, anti-Muslim violence after 2009 became more frequent. A report submitted by the SLMC to the UNHCR noted that between January and December 2013, there were at least 241 anti-Muslim attacks, with 51 of them being violent in nature. Most of these attacks were perpetrated by socio-political movements or politicians. In almost all cases, law enforcement officials failed to protect basic constitutional and human rights, although they were often present at the scene of the attacks. This violence continued with a major incident in

Alutgama in 2014, following a hate speech by monk Galagoda Gnanasara. Similar incidents occurred in Gintota (November 2017), Ampara (February 2018), Digana, Teldeniya, Katugastota, and Kandy (March 2018). However, none of the perpetrators were brought to justice, due to political considerations ahead of the 2019 presidential election. This inaction became a direct trigger for NTJ radicals to respond violently against their Sinhalese counterparts (Balamayuran, 2018).

4. *Islamic Radicalization in Sri Lanka and the Birth of the NTJ in Response to Anti-Muslim Violence*

The year 2009 marked a major shift in the Sri Lankan Muslim community's response to the evolving socio-political circumstances. Previously, despite the influence of global radical Islamic movements, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka tended to keep its distance from the history of radicalization sweeping the rest of the Muslim world. Most Muslims preferred to live within the Sinhalese-dominated state, with an unwillingness to be assimilated into the larger Tamil community. They felt that living within the Sinhalese-majority political framework was a reasonably safe way to avoid major tensions. However, after 2009, when anti-Muslim violence led by Buddhist supremacist groups became more frequent and the government failed to address the violence, the emergence of radical groups such as the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ) became an unavoidable reality.

Zahran Hashim, NTJ leader, was born in Kattankudy on 19 September 1986 into a low-income family. After completing his primary education, he continued his education at Jamiathul Falah, a famous madrasa in Kattankudy. There, Zahran memorized the Qur'an and became a hafiz. However, due to his undisciplined behaviour, disloyalty towards his teachers, and criticism of the Tabligh Jamaat teachings closely associated with the madrasa, he was expelled in 2000. Zahran then continued his education at Ibn Masooth Arabic College in Kurunegala, but was expelled from there as well. Afterwards, he returned to Kattankudy and founded an organisation called Dharul Athar, although its activities are not widely known. Zahran later broke away from Dharul Athar and founded NTJ around 2017. A preacher with dazzling oratory skills, Zahran attracted thousands of people to listen to his increasingly radicalized speeches.

One of his video-recorded speeches stated that Sri Lanka was a 'land of infidels' and questioned the country's sovereignty as according to him, sovereignty belongs only to Allah. He also stated that living in Sri Lanka is haram for a Muslim. These statements signaled a major shift from the historical outlook of Sri Lankan Muslims, who for over a thousand years lived peacefully as a minority in the country. Although Muslims were previously insulted as 'foreigners' by some leaders like Dharmapala, they remained loyal to the land of Sri Lanka, integrated into society and never gave up their allegiance to the country. However, the NTJ led by Zahran challenged this view, making Sri Lanka a forbidden country for Muslims to live in. This marked the birth of the first radical Islamic organization in Sri Lanka.

The growth and radicalization of the NTJ must be seen in the context of global developments, especially with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013. ISIS invites Muslims from around the world to join their caliphate and continue the jihad against 'Crusaders and Jews.' While there is no

hard evidence to suggest that Zahran or NTJ members directly joined IS, the ideology espoused by IS and other radical Islamic groups clearly influenced their thinking. Through electronic media, these radical messages spread widely, and the NTJ began making anti-Buddhist hate speeches, one of which accused a Buddhist monk. Electronic media plays an important role in shaping Sri Lanka-based homegrown terrorism, although this is still not sufficiently studied, and measures to counter it are not well developed.

When radical ideology from abroad meets anti-Muslim violence at home, and the government's failure to address the violence and bring perpetrators to justice, the situation creates space for a backlash from radicalized elements among Muslims. The coordinated bomb blasts on Easter Day, 21 April 2019, which destroyed Catholic churches, tourist hotels, and killed more than 250 people, became the first violent reaction of the radical NTJ group. In this context, Christians became innocent victims in the conflict between radical Buddhism and growing Islamism. The full history of this tragedy, though recorded, still raises many questions that have yet to be answered by an independent investigation. The report prepared by the Parliamentary Select Committee on this tragedy raises more questions than it answers (Jayathiake, 2019). What is clear, however, is that the NTJ did not emerge from a theoretical vacuum. It is an outgrowth of Sri Lanka's religion-rooted politics, which began with the radicalization of Buddhism, followed by Islam. Once political Buddhism was transformed into a supremacist ideology in the hands of radical monks, chauvinist politicians, and their followers, and began targeting Islam and Muslims, counter-radicalization on the part of Muslims became inevitable, given the international reach of Islamist ideology. The NTJ was the first manifestation of Islamism in Sri Lanka. Whether it is also the last, remains a big question.

DISCUSSION

This research reveals how the radicalization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, which began in the mid-20th century, has led to the rise of Buddhist supremacist groups targeting Muslim communities, and how this contributed to the formation of the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ) as a response from the Muslim community to anti-Muslim violence. As the post-2009 violence intensified, groups like the NTJ began to emerge, inspired by the global radicalization of Islamism and the inability of the Sri Lankan government to deal with the violence. Zahran Hashim, the leader of the NTJ, took the organization to the pinnacle of radicalization by calling for extreme measures against Sri Lanka which he considered to be the 'land of infidels.'

The findings of this study show that the radicalization of Muslim communities in Sri Lanka did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather as a response to a process of radicalization of Buddhism that has been ongoing since the mid-20th century. This process was characterized by the politicization of Buddhism that was attached exclusively to Sinhalese ethnic identity, thus creating symbolic structures that excluded Muslim communities from the national narrative. As anti-Muslim violence escalated and the state failed to provide fair legal protection, feelings of injustice and alienation grew among Muslims. Based on Social Identity Theory

(Tajfel et al., 1979), the strengthening of the majority group's identity in the context of conflict psychologically encourages the formation of a new collective identity of the marginalized group, which in this case manifests in the form of religion-based political resistance. The absence of a state response to violence also reinforces perceptions of structural inequality, which then opens up space for the entry of transnational radical ideologies as a means to re-establish group dignity and security. Thus, the relationship between Buddhist radicalization and Muslim radical reaction emerges from the interplay between symbolic marginalization, the absence of state protection, and the dynamics of collective identity in conflict situations. This shows that radicalism is not only triggered by global external factors, but also produced locally through unequal power relations based on religion and ethnicity. As shown in Sandria's (2025) study of the Confucian community in Indonesia, political pressure and systemic discrimination can push minority communities to form collective identities and adaptive strategies, but this does not always lead to radicalization. This is an important comparison, as responses to marginalization can vary depending on the internal dynamics of the community and the form of socio-political support available.

This research is in line with a number of previous studies that highlight the close relationship between religious nationalism and radicalization, particularly in the context of religion-based identity politics. Studies on Islamic radicalization in the Middle East such as in Egypt (Gunaratna & Ali, 2009; Neo, 2019) and Pakistan (Hashmi, 2016; Iqbal & Mehmood, 2021; Javed, Elahi, & Nawab, 2025) show that social injustice and political neglect of minority groups are the main triggers for the emergence of extremism as a form of resistance. However, in contrast to these contexts, this study shows that in Sri Lanka, Muslim radicalization is not only triggered by direct discrimination, but also as a reaction to the increasing radicalization of politically mobilized Buddhism. As outlined by Imtiyaz (2010, 2014) and Weiberg-Salzmann (2014), Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been politicized for a long time and used by Sinhala-Buddhist elites as a tool to reinforce ethnoreligious dominance. Herath (2020) and Mohamed Fouz & Moniruzzaman (2021) note that the narrative of Buddhism as a historically victimized community has been used as an ideological justification to marginalize Muslim groups. After the civil war, anti-Muslim rhetoric has intensified (Abdul Razak & Mohamed Saleem, 2022), and groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena have used social media to mobilize hatred (Ivarsson, 2019). Ramasamy (2023) added that economic inequality and the state's failure to provide justice accelerated the path of youth radicalization in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, religious symbols are used strategically by both Buddhist radicals and parties such as the SLMC that frame Muslim identity politics theologically (Woods, 2018). As such, this research extends the understanding of radicalization dynamics by showing how the two major religious identities of Buddhism and Islam are reciprocally radicalized in the context of Sri Lanka's local political, social and historical conflicts. This research offers a new perspective by linking the radicalization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka with the emergence of local Islamic radicalization. While many previous studies have discussed Islamic radicalization in a global context, this research shows how the radicalization of majority religions, in this case Buddhism, can create enabling conditions for radicalization within minority groups. This provides a deeper

understanding of the dynamics of religious politics in Sri Lanka that is more complex than previously recognized.

The results of this study show that religious radicalization in Sri Lanka, particularly between Buddhist and Muslim communities, is not solely triggered by the influence of transnational ideologies, but is deeply rooted in local dynamics involving the politicization of religion, symbolic exclusion and structural inequality that have persisted since the mid-20th century. The politicization of Buddhism attached to Sinhalese ethnic identity has created an exclusionary national narrative that excludes Muslim communities from the construction of equal citizenship. In this context, when the state fails to provide equal protection and justice, the sense of alienation and injustice experienced by Muslim groups reinforces faith-based collective identities that can eventually evolve into radical forms of resistance (Gurr, 1970). The absence of a state response to anti-Muslim violence opens space for the entry of transnational radical ideologies that promise to restore dignity and a sense of collective security, as seen in the emergence of NTJ, which adopts a global Islamist narrative (Juergensmeyer, 2003; Pape, 2005). As such, this research makes an important contribution to the understanding of radicalism as a product of the interaction between symbolic exclusion, the absence of structural justice, and group identity dynamics in conflict situations (Stewart, 2008).

The results of this study have important implications for understanding the dynamics of religious radicalization in Sri Lanka and its function in shaping interfaith relations. On the one hand, the findings serve to reveal that radicalization does not necessarily stem from transnational ideologies, but can develop locally due to symbolic inequality, political exclusion and structural injustice (Deegalle, 2016a; Haniffa, 2019). This provides a basis for policymakers and peace actors to direct attention to internal factors such as exclusive national identity narratives and the failure of the state to ensure justice as the roots of conflicts that must be addressed (Spencer, 2020; Venugopal, 2018). But on the other hand, this research has also uncovered serious dysfunctions in the form of a cycle of identity violence in which mutually reinforcing radicalization of majority groups triggers radicalization of minority groups, which in turn reinforces threat narratives between each community (Amarasingam & Fuller, 2019b; Gunatilleke, 2015). The negative consequences of this cycle are eroded social cohesion, increased intolerance, and weakened state capacity to maintain stability and pluralism (Höglund & Orjuela, 2011; Uyangoda, 2011). If not addressed with identity reconciliation approaches and structural reforms, this process of radicalization has the potential to recur and become more entrenched in the fabric of Sri Lankan society.

The findings of this study suggest that to address the dynamics of religious radicalization in Sri Lanka, policy reforms are needed that focus on reconstructing an inclusive national identity, strengthening legal protections for minorities, and building interfaith reconciliation mechanisms. First, the state needs to reformulate the national narrative, which has been dominated by Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism, to reflect the diversity of religious and ethnic identities that exist. Second, the government needs to strengthen legal protection institutions and take firm action against religious-based violence by establishing a special unit for

handling hate crimes and ensuring the accountability of the authorities in upholding justice. Third, there needs to be an interfaith reconciliation and dialogue policy oriented towards restoring social relations, especially between Buddhist and Muslim communities, by involving moderate religious leaders, interfaith NGOs, and educational institutions as facilitators. This strategy should be supported by community-based deradicalization programs targeting the younger generation, in order to break the chain of reproduction of narratives of hatred and radicalism (P. Ramasamy, 2023). Without structural and symbolic measures that address the roots of inequality and exclusion, this mutually reinforcing cycle of radicalization will continue to threaten social cohesion and political stability in Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION

The main findings of this study show that religious radicalization in Sri Lanka, both in the context of Buddhism and Islam, has exacerbated ethno-religious tensions and created a mutually exacerbating cycle of violence. Buddhist radicalization rooted in Sinhala-Buddhist national identity, as well as Buddhist politicization and supremacist ideology, has fueled Islamic radicalization in response to anti-Muslim violence that occurred after 2009. The existence of radical groups such as the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ) is a manifestation of Islamic radicalization, inspired by social injustice and growing sectarian tensions. This research highlights how the radicalization of these two religions is interconnected and contributes to wider social and political divisions in Sri Lanka.

The main scholarly contribution of this research is to introduce a deeper understanding of the relationship between the radicalization of Buddhism and Islam in Sri Lanka, which has previously been little explored in the existing literature. This research combines social, political and religious aspects with a qualitative approach that allows researchers to explore more complex and in-depth dynamics of the phenomenon of religious radicalization in Sri Lanka. It also provides a new perspective by showing how radicalization of the majority religion, in this case Buddhism, can create fertile conditions for radicalization in minority communities, as is the case with the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

However, this research has limitations, one of which is the inability to gain insights directly from the affected communities through interviews or field observations. This research relied heavily on secondary data and document analysis which may not fully encompass the deeper perspectives of the directly involved communities. Therefore, a suggestion for future research is to conduct direct interviews with various stakeholders and Sri Lankan society to gain a more holistic understanding of the social and political impact of religious radicalization. More in-depth and comprehensive research could also examine the role of international factors in exacerbating religious tensions in Sri Lanka.

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