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MUSLIM CONTRIBUTIONS TO INTERRELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION IN SRI LANKA: HISTORY, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This study explores the vital role of Sri Lankan Muslims in interreligious peacebuilding within the country's diverse post-conflict social landscape, emphasising their important contributions to fostering reconciliation and harmony among religious communities. Sri Lankan Muslims have actively promoted interreligious dialogue initiatives, leveraging Islamic principles emphasising peace, justice, and coexistence. This paper aims to showcase key initiatives led by Islamic organisations, including grassroots peacebuilding efforts in ethnically mixed communities and collaborative projects focused on social justice and community development. This study uses historical, descriptive, and analytical methods. The findings reveal that these Muslim-led initiatives have significantly enhanced mutual understanding and respect among various religious groups, contributing to broader societal stability and harmony. Additionally, it highlights the exceptional contributions and difficulties that Muslims in Sri Lanka have encountered in interreligious discourse, offering insightful insights into other multireligious environments worldwide. By providing insights into these efforts, the research contributes to the broader discourse on interreligious peacebuilding, highlighting the potential of Muslim engagement in creating a more peaceful and integrated society. The findings advocate for increased recognition and support of Muslim contributions to interreligious peacebuilding as a vital component of national reconciliation and unity.

Keywords: *Peacebuilding, reconciliation, Sri Lanka, Muslim, interreligious.*

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a land of remarkable cultural diversity, enriched by a long history of coexistence among multiple religious and ethnic communities. This rich tapestry of religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—has been a cornerstone of Sri Lankan identity for centuries. These communities have lived side by side and often in harmony, contributing to a vibrant shared heritage. However, periods of social and political upheaval have tested these relationships. During colonial rule, for example, the British exploited ethnic and religious differences as part of a divide-and-rule strategy, sowing seeds of mistrust that lingered into the post-independence era.[1] The more

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[1] Ahamed Sarjoon Razick, Ahmad Sunawari Long, and Kamarudin Salleh. “Historical Relationship Between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2015): 278-284.

recent civil war (1983–2009), though primarily an ethnic conflict between the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority, had significant religious undertones that strained interreligious trust and harmony. In its aftermath, Sri Lanka has grappled with episodes of religious tension, including instances of anti-Muslim violence and the rise of ethno-religious nationalism that threaten to polarise communities.[2] These realities underscore the urgent need for fostering understanding and cooperation among all religious groups to ensure a lasting peace.

In the post-conflict era, peacebuilding and reconciliation have become national imperatives, moral and social obligations as much as political goals—for a country aspiring toward unity after decades of strife. Religious communities play a pivotal role in this process, given their profound influence on social values, identities, and communal attitudes. Among these groups, the Muslim minority (roughly 9–10% of the population) is especially significant. Sri Lankan Muslims have not only been stakeholders in the nation's multicultural fabric for over a millennium, but they have also taken active steps to bridge divides and heal wounds in the aftermath of conflict. Their contributions to interreligious peacebuilding – as well as the challenges they face – merit close examination. By understanding how Muslims have promoted peace and reconciliation, we gain insight into the broader prospects for harmony in Sri Lanka's multi-religious society.

Recent scholarship on Sri Lanka has extensively examined ethnic conflict, post-war reconciliation, Buddhist-Muslim relations, and the rise of Islamophobia. Scholars such as McGilvray, Haniffa, Imtiyaz, and Nuhman have explored Muslim identity, minority politics, and the socio-political challenges faced by Muslims in contemporary Sri Lanka. Similarly, studies on religious coexistence have highlighted the role of interreligious dialogue in mitigating communal tensions and fostering social harmony. However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on Muslims either as victims of conflict, targets of ethno-religious nationalism, or participants in broader political processes. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of Muslim actors as active agents of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Furthermore, existing studies often provide descriptive accounts of interreligious engagement without critically evaluating the effectiveness, limitations, and broader implications of Muslim-led peacebuilding initiatives.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the historical and contemporary contributions of Sri Lankan Muslims to interreligious peacebuilding while critically assessing the challenges, limitations, and future opportunities associated with these efforts. In doing so, the discussion illuminates the often-under-recognised role of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka's post-conflict reconciliation journey. It offers valuable lessons for other multi-religious societies navigating similar challenges. The following sections provide the necessary context, review relevant concepts and literature, outline the approach taken, and present the findings and analysis of Muslims' peacebuilding contributions, the obstacles encountered, and future opportunities to enhance interreligious harmony.

[2] Fatima Afra Mohamed Razak, and Thameem Ushama. "Buddhist-Muslim Religious Co-Existence in Sri Lanka: A historical analysis." *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 87-109.

Historical and Social Context of Sri Lanka's Multireligious Society

Sri Lanka's social fabric is a mosaic of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups with centuries of interaction. The population of 22 million (2024 census) is predominantly Buddhist (70.2%), followed by Hindus (12.6%), Muslims (9.7%) and Christians (7.4%).[3] The majority of Sinhalese are mostly Theravāda Buddhists, while the Sri Lankan Tamils (and smaller Indian Tamil community) are predominantly Hindu. Christians (Roman Catholics and Protestants) include both Sinhalese and Tamils. The Muslims of Sri Lanka—mostly Sri Lankan Moors who speak Tamil as their mother tongue—form the second-largest minority and are found island-wide, with concentrations in the Eastern Province and urban centres. Over centuries, these groups developed a complex but generally amicable coexistence. As historian Lorna Dewaraja observed, relations between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims were so harmonious in the past that they "passed unnoticed by the historian," constituting "a millennium of an unparalleled golden era" of peaceful interaction (900–1915).[4] This long history of cordial ties, nourished by mutual trust and cultural exchange, has withstood many attempts by colonial powers and extremist elements to foment division.[5] It is within this pluralistic milieu that the Muslim community established its identity and evolved its role in society.

Each major religion in Sri Lanka is deeply intertwined with the country's history and identity. Buddhism has been the dominant faith since its introduction in the 3rd century BCE, and it enjoys privileged status today. The Constitution of Sri Lanka (1978) accords Buddhism the "foremost place," obliging the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana (the Buddhist religion).[6] This effectively makes Buddhism the state religion, reflecting its centrality to Sinhalese culture and national heritage. Sri Lanka's landscape is accordingly dotted with thousands of Buddhist temples and monasteries, and Buddhist customs heavily influence national holidays, education, and public life. Hinduism, introduced via millennia of contact with South India, is the majority faith in the Northern and Eastern provinces and has indelibly shaped Sri Lankan Tamil culture. The historical ties between Sri Lankan Hindus and India (especially Tamil Nadu) are evident in shared temple traditions and religious festivals. Christianity arrived with Western colonial powers (first the Portuguese and Dutch, then the British) between the 16th and 19th centuries. While Christians have always been a minority, their influence on Sri Lankan society has been significant out of proportion to their numbers, particularly in the sphere of education. Missionaries established many of the island's first formal schools. They introduced Western education models and social reforms (such as the abolition of slavery and caste disabilities), some

[3] Department of Census and Statistics – Sri Lanka, Census of population and Housing 2012 and 2024, Colombo, DCS, 2025. Accessed November 25, 2025. https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/Population/CPH_2024/CPH2024_Preliminary_Report.pdf

[4] Lorna Dewaraja. *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony, 900-1915*. Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2019. 1.

[5] Ahamed Sarjoon Razick, Ahmad Sunawari Long, and Kamarudin Salleh. "Historical relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2015): 278-284.

[6] "The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka" (As amended up to 31st October 2022), Parliament Secretariat, Revised Edition – 2023. Article 9, p. 3.

of which were later continued under British rule.[7] Thus, Christian institutions contributed to social change, produced a class of English-educated elites, and engaged in charity and health services.

The Muslim Minority in Historical Perspective

Islam's presence in Sri Lanka dates back over a thousand years. Arab and Persian traders frequented the island's harbours by the 7th and 8th centuries CE, during the formative period of Islam.[8] Many of these merchants settled down, married local women, and established enduring Muslim communities along the coast. By the 8th century, Arab traders had become integral to Indian Ocean commerce, forming merchant colonies in port cities of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) such as Colombo, Beruwala, Jaffna, and Trincomalee.[9] Encouraged by generally cordial treatment from Sinhalese kings, these early Muslims thrived as intermediaries in trade, connecting Sri Lanka with the Middle East and Southeast Asia.[10] They introduced not only new commodities but also elements of Islamic culture, while adopting many local customs themselves. Over time, the Sri Lankan Muslim community (predominantly of Moorish Arab descent) grew through further immigration (e.g. Muslim traders and Sufi scholars from India) and natural increase. Smaller subsets, such as Sri Lankan Malays, trace their origins to Southeast Asian Muslim soldiers and officials brought by the Dutch and British in the 18th – 19th centuries; they added their own cultural strands to Sri Lanka's Muslim tapestry.[11]

Despite their diverse origins, Sri Lankan Muslims became a distinct community, united by Islam and a conscious identity separate from the island's ethnic Sinhalese and Tamils. They generally lived peacefully among the Sinhalese and Tamil majorities, acting as a bridge in many locales. For instance, during the medieval and early modern periods, Muslims often served as envoys and translators for Sinhalese kings in dealings with South Indian courts, and as suppliers of foreign goods (such as horses and firearms) that were crucial to the Sinhala kingdoms' survival under colonial pressure.[12] This symbiotic relationship was notably demonstrated in the 17th century when the Kandyan king Senerat provided refuge to Muslim families who were persecuted and expelled from coastal areas by Portuguese colonisers; in return, Muslims aided the Kandyan kingdom economically and militarily against the European powers.[13]

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[7] K.M.De. Silva. *A History of Sri Lanka*, London: C. Hurst & Company, 1981, 327-330.
[8] Sirima Kiribamune, "Muslims and the trade of the Arabian Sea with Special Reference to Sri Lanka from the Birth of Islam to the Fifteenth Century", in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, ed. MAM Shukri (Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 94-95.
[9] K.M.De. Silva. *A History of Sri Lanka*, London: C. Hurst & Company, 1981, 90-91.
[10] Sirima Kiribamune, "Muslims and the trade of the Arabian Sea…, 90.
[11] B.A. Husainmiya, "Princess and Soldiers: The Antecedents of Sri Lankan Malay ", in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, ed. MAM Shukri (Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 279-280.
[12] Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: one thousand years of ….* 137-138.
[13] T.B.H. Abeyasinghe, "Muslims in Sri Lanka in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, ed. MAM Shukri (Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 141; Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: one thousand years of …,* 60.

Colonial Era Challenges

Under European colonial rule (1505–1948), Sri Lankan Muslims faced new trials even as some opportunities arose. The Portuguese (1505–1658) were hostile towards the Moors, viewing them as economic competitors and potential allies of Muslim powers. The Portuguese carried out pogroms against the Muslim population, destroying mosques and warehouses and driving many Muslims to flee the coastal towns.[14] The demographic decline of the Moors during this era was significant. The subsequent Dutch administration (1658–1796) was relatively less harsh; Dutch authorities, being Protestant, did not directly target Islam as the Catholic Portuguese had, and they even encouraged some Muslim traders (including Malays and South Indian Muslims) to settle for trade. Nevertheless, Muslims under Dutch rule remained a disadvantaged community, and some discriminatory measures (like restrictions on mosque construction) persisted.[15] The British colonial period (1796–1948) brought a different dynamic: the British lifted many legal restrictions on minority religions and maintained a policy of relative religious neutrality. During British rule, Muslims enjoyed freedom of worship, re-established institutions, and a small Muslim elite emerged (often educated in English and engaged in trade or the civil service).[16] The late 19th century also saw an Islamic revival among Sri Lankan Muslims, paralleling the Buddhist revival; Muslim leaders founded schools (such as Zahira College in 1892) and presses to strengthen community education and identity.[17]

However, British policies of ethnic representation and favour (perceived or real) towards certain groups contributed to new inter-communal frictions. For example, competition for economic opportunity under colonial capitalism occasionally sparked tensions between Muslims and Sinhalese or Tamils. The first major ethnic riot in modern Sri Lankan history was the 1915 Sinhalese-Muslim riot, an anti-Muslim pogrom that began in Kandy and spread across coastal towns. Sparked ostensibly by a dispute over a religious procession, the violence was fueled by economic rivalry and Sinhala Buddhist propaganda against Muslims (who were portrayed as foreign "Moors" dominating trade).[18] The 1915 clashes shattered the complacent assumption of eternal harmony; they also galvanised the Muslims politically, leading to the formation of the first Muslim political organisations in Ceylon.[19] Ironically, Sinhala and Muslim leaders later reconciled and worked together in agitation against British colonialism (as the British repression of the 1915 riots had angered Sinhalese elites). Nonetheless, 1915 was a warning that, if not carefully managed, pluralism in Sri Lanka could be undermined by chauvinism.

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[14] MAM Shukri. *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, (Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 349.
[15] See K.W. Goonewardene, "Muslim Under Dutch Rule Up to the Mid-Eighteenth Century", in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, ed. MAM Shukri (Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 189-209.
[16] See M.N.M. Kamil Asad. *The Muslims of Sri Lanka Under the British Rule*, (New Delhi: NAWRANG, 1993).
[17] Vijaya Samaraveera, "Aspects of the Muslim Revivalist Movement in Late Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka", in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, ed. MAM Shukri (Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 371-372.
[18] K.M.De. Silva. *A History of Sri Lanka*, London: C. Hurst & Company, 1981, 382.
[19] Mansoor Mohamed Fazil, "The Muslim factor in the Sri Lankan conflict." In Dealing *with Diversity, Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict*, eds. G. Frerks and B. Klem, (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2004), 161-182.

By the mid-20th century, at independence (1948), Sri Lanka's Muslims had a distinct identity (sometimes identifying as an ethnic group called Ceylon Moors).[20] They were generally bilingual (fluent in Tamil, with many also speaking Sinhala, especially in the south) and had integrated elements from both Sinhala and Tamil cultures over centuries.[21] For example, in the central highlands and southern coasts, Muslim communities often adopted Sinhala dress and some Sinhala language usage, whereas in the Tamil-majority north and east, Muslim customs more closely resembled Tamil culture—yet all remained bound by the Islamic faith and Moorish heritage. This cultural synthesis allowed Muslims to act as a socio-cultural bridge, but it also meant that politically, Muslims did not automatically ally with either of the larger ethnic blocs.[22] In the early post-independence decades, Muslims navigated a delicate balance: they generally sided with Sinhalese-led governments on specific issues (such as opposing Tamil federalism/separatism), hoping to secure protection as a minority; yet they also sought to preserve their linguistic rights (favouring Tamil as an official language alongside Sinhala) and administrative representation in areas where they were concentrated.[23] Over time, as Sinhala-Tamil ethnic tensions grew, the Muslims in the Eastern Province (where they formed about a third of the population) sometimes found themselves caught in the middle of the Sinhalese vs. Tamil struggle.

Civil War and Aftermath

The latter half of the 20th century was dominated by the civil war (1983–2009) between the Sinhalese-dominated government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant group fighting for an independent Tamil homeland. Although this conflict is often described in ethnic terms (Sinhalese vs. Tamils), it had critical religious dimensions: the Sinhalese state was increasingly intertwined with Buddhist nationalism, and the Tamil struggle rallied many Hindus (as well as Christian Tamils) in the cause of Tamil rights.[24] Muslims, as a separate community mostly speaking Tamil but not supporting Tamil separatism, suffered greatly during the war. The LTTE viewed Muslims with suspicion, especially after some Muslim political leaders aligned with the national government.[25] Notoriously, in 1990, the LTTE expelled around 72,000 Muslims from the Northern Province in a matter of days (a case of ethnic cleansing that uprooted communities who had lived for generations in Jaffna and Mannar).[26] In the Eastern Province, LTTE militants carried out massacres of Muslim villagers and worshippers (e.g. the Kattankudy mosque massacre

[20] See Dennis McGilvray and Mirak Raheem. "Origins of the Sri Lankan Muslims and varieties of Muslim identity." In *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. John Califford Holt, (London: Duke University Press, 2011): 410-23.
[21] M.A. Nuhman. *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity Within Cultural Diversity*, (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2007), 50-51.
[22] Dennis B. McGilvray. *Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka*. (Duke University Press, 2008), 7.
[23] M.A. Nuhman. *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity…,* 116-117.
[24] Alvappillai Velupillai. "Sinhala Fears of Tamil Demands", in *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. ed. Mahinda Deegalle, Vol. 270. (London: Routledge, 2006), 94.
[25] Dennis B. McGilvray, "Sri Lankan Muslims: Between Ethno-Nationalism and The Global Ummah." *Nations and nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 45-64.
[26] A.R.M. Imtiyaz and M. C. M. Iqbal. "The Displaced Northern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and the Future." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 4 (2011): 375-389.

in 1990 that killed over 140 men and boys at prayer).[27] These atrocities left deep scars on Muslim-Tamil relations. Muslims formed their own political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), in the 1980s under M. H. M. Ashraff, to assert their interests in peace negotiations and regional governance.[28] The SLMC demanded autonomous power-sharing in the east for Muslims but was sidelined mainly in national peace talks. When peace negotiations occurred (such as in 2002), Muslim representatives were either excluded or had minimal influence, as the focus remained on the government and the LTTE, illustrating the Muslims' limited leverage in high-level conflict resolution.[29] Despite being victimised by the war, Muslims were often perceived as "outsiders" to the Sinhala-Tamil conflict. Thus, their grievances (refugee crises, loss of life and property, etc.) were not fully addressed in the eventual peace settlement.

Since the war's end in 2009, Sri Lanka's Muslims have faced new challenges. The void of the Tamil insurgency was partly filled by a resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist ultra-nationalism.[30] Hardline groups propagated the notion that the Muslim minority posed a cultural and demographic threat to the Sinhala Buddhist nation. This led to a wave of anti-Muslim rhetoric and sporadic violence in the 2010s. Major incidents included organised riots in Aluthgama (2014) and Kandy district (2018), where Sinhala Buddhist mobs targeted Muslim homes, shops, and mosques, often egged on by extremist monks (notably *the Bodu Bala Sena* or "Buddhist Power Force").[31] Moreover, the devastating Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in April 2019 – carried out by a local Islamist extremist cell that bombed churches and hotels – dealt a severe blow to interreligious relations. In the wake of those attacks (which killed over 250, mostly Christians), the entire Muslim community came under suspicion and experienced collective reprisal. There were mob attacks on Muslim properties and a climate of fear, as well as heavy-handed state measures like the temporary banning of face veils and the arrest or surveillance of numerous Muslim activists and institutions.[32] Although Muslim civil society and religious leaders unequivocally condemned the Easter bombings and worked with Christian clergy to restore trust, the episode intensified Islamophobic tendencies in society and highlighted the fragility of intercommunal relations.

Sri Lanka's multi-religious society has a rich history of coexistence and cooperation, but also a legacy of tensions inflamed by colonial manipulation, nationalist politics, and extremist violence. The Muslim minority's story exemplifies this duality: on one hand, centuries of peaceful engagement and cultural integration; on the other hand, periods of marginalisation, conflict, and scapegoating. In the post-conflict era, rebuilding trust across religious divides is essential. Peace is not merely the absence of war, but the restoration of harmonious living among Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians as equal citizens of one nation. This requires concerted efforts in

[27] Shahul Hasbullah and Benedikt Korf. "Muslim Geographies, Violence and the Antinomies of Community in Eastern Sri Lanka." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 1 (2013): 32–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23360884.
[28] A.R.M. Imtiyaz and M. C. M. Iqbal. "The Displaced Northern Muslims of Sri Lanka: Special Problems and the Future." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 4 (2011): 375-389.
[29] Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem. "Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict." *Policy Studies 41*, (Washington: East West Centre, 2007), 23-25.
[30] Nil DeVotta, "A Win for Democracy in Sri Lanka." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 152-166.
[31] Farzana Haniffa. "Stories in the Aftermath of Aluthgama." In *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities. Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, edited by John Holt, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 164– 93.
[32] Abdul Razak Mohamed Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 3-16.

peacebuilding (addressing the root causes of hostility, healing trauma, and creating structures for justice) and reconciliation (forgiving past wrongs and forging a new collective identity). The role of religious communities in this process is crucial. Spiritual leaders often enjoy public trust and moral authority; their teachings embody compassion, forgiveness, and neighbourly love that can underpin reconciliation efforts. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks, Hindu Swamis, Christian Clergy, and Muslim Moulavis all have contributions to make in promoting interreligious understanding. The remainder of this paper focuses on the contributions the Muslim community has made to interreligious peacebuilding, the challenges they have encountered, and the opportunities that lie ahead to enhance their engagement in building a peaceful, pluralistic Sri Lanka.

Contribution of Muslims to Interreligious Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

Interreligious peacebuilding refers to efforts to promote understanding, reduce tensions, and build unity among different religious communities. In Sri Lanka's diverse society, such peacebuilding is essential for national stability. Despite its minority status, the Muslim community has made several noteworthy contributions to these efforts. These contributions can be seen at multiple levels: the moral and theological discourse (drawing on Islamic principles of peace and justice), grassroots initiatives and social services that build bridges on the ground, and institutional engagement through organisations and dialogue forums. Together, these represent how Sri Lankan Muslims have worked towards a more harmonious plural society.

Islamic Principles as a Framework for Peace and Justice

Islam provides a robust ethical framework that has motivated many Muslim individuals and leaders in Sri Lanka to act as peacemakers. Central to this is the concept of justice (*'adl*) – the Qur'an repeatedly enjoins Muslims to "stand firmly for justice" even if it be against themselves or their kin (*Qur'an* 4:135). This emphasis means that in situations of conflict or discord, doing what is just (rather than merely favouring one's own side) is seen as a religious duty. For example, during communal riots or controversies, Muslim leaders have often appealed to the principle of justice by condemning violence outright (even violence committed by fellow Muslims) and calling for fair treatment of all communities under the law. A related principle is compassion and mercy: the *Qur'an's* most common invocation is "In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful," and Muslims are taught that Allah's mercy should be reflected in their own behaviour. This has inspired charitable efforts by Muslims to assist victims of conflicts regardless of religion – such as Muslim groups helping rebuild churches destroyed in the war, or aiding Buddhist and Hindu villagers after disasters – as acts of compassionate outreach.

The *Qur'anic* idea of *knowing one another* across group lines (49:13) has directly informed interreligious initiatives. Prominent Sri Lankan Muslim scholars have quoted this verse in interreligious gatherings to stress that Islam celebrates diversity. For instance, the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU, the council of Muslim theologians) frequently cites Qur'an 49:13 in its statements on national unity, interpreting it as a call to dialogue and mutual respect among Sri

Lanka's religions. They have also cited the Prophet's example of the *Mithāq al-Madīnah* (Charter of Medina) as an Islamic precedent for a pluralistic state where different religions coexist with equal dignity. This kind of theological framing provides a powerful counter-narrative to extremist ideologies: it asserts that one can be a devout Muslim while wholeheartedly embracing interreligious friendship and cooperation.

Hadiths and Islamic ethics regarding reconciliation (sulh) have been applied in practice to conflict resolution. The hadith of *"reconciling between people"* being better than ritual worship has been invoked by Muslim peace practitioners to encourage mediation in local disputes.[33] Islamic scholars have at times played the role of informal arbitrators between communities, using Islamic teachings on forgiveness (*for instance, the Quranic verse 41:34: "Repel evil with that which is better, and your enemy may become like a close friend"*) to persuade Muslim youth to desist from retaliation and instead show goodwill. An illustrative case occurred in 2014 after the Aluthgama riots: local Muslim religious leaders in affected areas urged their congregations during Friday sermons to stay calm, practice patience (*sabr*), and not view their Buddhist neighbours with hatred – often quoting Prophet Muhammad's forgiveness of his oppressors in Mecca as an example. Many Muslims heeded this counsel, which helped prevent revenge attacks and gradually restored inter-communal relations in those localities.

It can be remarked that internalisation of Islamic principles of peace, justice, and reconciliation has been a key contribution of Sri Lankan Muslims. It provides them with a moral compass for peacebuilding and a language of values that can be shared in interfaith dialogues. By articulating an Islamic case for coexistence, Muslim scholars and activists help neutralise extremist interpretations and reassure followers of other religions that Islam is not a threat but a partner in the search for peace. This contribution is subtle and long-term – it works on the level of attitudes and narratives – but it is fundamental, underpinning the more tangible initiatives discussed next.

Islamic Organisations in Sri Lanka and Their Peacebuilding Roles

Sri Lanka's Muslim community, despite being a minority, has several religious and civil society organisations that actively promote peace, reconciliation, and interreligious understanding. Here, we highlight key organisations and initiatives – including the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the National Shoora Council (NSC), and grassroots efforts – to demonstrate the diverse ways in which Sri Lankan Muslims contribute to peacebuilding.

All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU)

The *All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama* (ACJU) is the apex body of Islamic scholars and theologians in Sri Lanka, established in 1924. It holds considerable religious and social influence within the

[33] Sunan Abu Dawud. *English Translation*, Book 43 (Kitab al-Adab), Hadith 4900 (hadith on reconciling between people being better than fasting/prayer/charity; narrated by Abu Darda').

country's Muslim community.[34] While its traditional mandate has focused on issuing religious guidance (*fatwas*), overseeing communal affairs, and managing Islamic religious institutions, the ACJU has, particularly in the post-war and post-2019 Easter Sunday attack context, significantly expanded its role as a proactive national advocate for interreligious harmony and moderation.

The ACJU's most visible public interventions have occurred in response to crises threatening communal cohesion. In the immediate aftermath of the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in April 2019, carried out in the name of local Islamist extremists, the ACJU issued unequivocal public condemnations of the violence.[35] Its scholars attended interreligious vigils and Christian memorial services, demonstrating solidarity and shared grief with the victims' communities. ACJU leadership worked directly with the Catholic Church and Buddhist clergy to forestall retaliatory violence against Muslims, a proactive stance analysts believe helped prevent widespread communal riots despite isolated incidents.[36] Moving beyond crisis management, the ACJU has institutionalised interreligious engagement. It established a dedicated outreach division, the Council for Cooperation and Coordination (CCC), to promote dialogue and understanding within and with other religious communities.[37] Furthermore, this CCC worked to reduce the misunderstanding of Muslims and Islam among the Buddhist majority, including the Monks. A landmark example of this pragmatic approach occurred in 2013 during tensions over *Halal* food certification from anti-Muslim propaganda. The ACJU engaged directly with senior Buddhist Clergy to explain the religious concept and voluntarily proposed compromises, such as delinking Halal certification from state processes, to alleviate broader public concerns.[38] This dialogue was instrumental in de-escalating a significant controversy. Furthermore, the ACJU has utilised religious advisories to promote neighbourly tolerance, instructing mosques on the responsible use of loudspeakers and condemning inflammatory speech. However, more militant voices sometimes challenge the ACJU's authority, and its internal inclusivity remains a topic of discussion.[39]

ACJU's commitment is further demonstrated through sustained participation in structured multi-religious platforms. It is a member of the Sri Lanka Council of Religions for Peace (SLCRP), a national chapter of Religions for Peace International. Through the SLCRP's network of 14 district interreligious committees, ACJU representatives collaborate with Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian leaders on concrete initiatives, including peace education workshops, youth leadership training, and joint humanitarian projects.[40] These programs aim explicitly to "restore and sustain

[34] For further information, see https://www.acju.lk/
[35] See Media Release "ACJU Strongly Condemns the Easter Sunday Attacks," All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, April 21, 2019. Accessed 30 November 2025. https://www.acju.lk/media-release/2/
[36] International Crisis Group, "Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: The Limits of Intelligence," *Briefing No. 166*, September 12, 2019.
[37] See https://www.acju.lk/our-structure/
[38] Sagarika Rajakarunanayake, "*Halal Issue can pave way to better understanding*" (Daily Mirror: Sri Lanka,13 March 2013), accessed 30 November 2025. https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/halal-issue-can-pave-way-to-better-understanding/172-26628
[39] See Farzana Haniffa, "'Reconciliation'Problems in Post-War Sri Lanka: The Anti-Muslim Movement and Ulema Council Responses." *Claiming and Making Muslim Worlds* (2021): 229-254.
[40] See SLCRP: https://sites.google.com/view/slcrp/home?authuser=0

multireligious peace, harmony, and unity" in Sri Lanka's post-conflict society, with a growing focus on involving youth and women in peacebuilding.

The ACJU has also demonstrated a willingness to engage in political advocacy to defend pluralist values. In 2021, it publicly criticised the presidential appointment of Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero—a Buddhist monk known for anti-Muslim rhetoric—to chair a national task force on legal reforms. In a strong statement, the ACJU expressed "shock and dismay" at the elevation of a figure "known for inciting disharmony," contrasting this with the work of other leaders striving for coexistence.[41] This rare direct criticism of a state decision highlighted the ACJU's principle that communal harmony should not be compromised by political manoeuvres and demonstrated interreligious solidarity, as leaders from other religions echoed the concern.[42]

Through these multifaceted efforts—crisis response, bilateral dialogue, institutional peacebuilding, and principled advocacy—the ACJU projects an identity of a Muslim leadership committed to national integration and Islamic principles of peace, such as the Qur'anic injunction to "repel evil with that which is better" (Qur'an 41:34). While navigating internal community dynamics and external pressures, its evolution from a primarily inward-looking religious body to a prominent voice for interfaith coexistence marks a significant development in Sri Lanka's contemporary socio-religious landscape.

While the ACJU has undoubtedly emerged as a significant actor in promoting interreligious harmony, a critical assessment reveals several limitations. Much of its peacebuilding engagement has been reactive rather than proactive, often intensifying only after communal crises such as anti-Muslim riots or the Easter Sunday attacks. Although the organisation has successfully projected a moderate Islamic voice, its outreach efforts have largely focused on responding to external threats rather than establishing long-term mechanisms for conflict prevention. Moreover, some critics argue that the ACJU's influence remains concentrated within the Muslim community, limiting its capacity to shape wider public discourse. Questions have also been raised regarding the inclusiveness of its leadership structures and the extent to which women and youth are represented in decision-making processes. These limitations do not diminish the organisation's contributions but highlight the challenges faced by faith-based institutions seeking to balance religious authority, community expectations, and broader peacebuilding responsibilities.

National Shoora Council (NSC)

While the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) serves as the apex religious body, the National Shoora Council (NSC) represents a broader, civil-society-driven initiative for Muslim communal coordination and national integration. Founded in 2013 in direct response to rising anti-Muslim

[41] See Media Release "Regarding The Establishment of the Presidential Task Force for One Country One Law," All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, October 29, 2021. Accessed 30 November 2025. https://www.acju.lk/media-release/2/

[42] See Vatican News Staff Reporters, "Sri Lanka Church Opposes government's 'One Country One Law' Plan," November 04 2021, accessed 30 November 2025. https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-11/sri-lanka-bishops-oppose-government-one-law-one-law-plan.html#:~:text=By%20Vatican%20News%20staff%20reporter,force%20as%20a%20lost%20opportunity.

sentiment and incidents, the NSC is a consultative umbrella body comprising numerous Muslim organisations, religious scholars (*ulama*), civil society movements, professionals, and regional representatives.[43] Its very name, "*Shoora*," meaning consultation, reflects its foundational Islamic principle of decision-making through mutual dialogue and consensus (*shura*), aiming to create a unified Muslim front to represent better community interests within Sri Lanka's legal and social framework.

The NSC's core mandate is twofold: to promote consultation, cooperation, and coordination within the Muslim community, and to foster stronger relations amongst all communities in Sri Lanka. To execute this wide-ranging mission, the NSC established a dedicated Coexistence Subcommittee to operationalise its goal of promoting peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and national unity. The NSC translates this mandate into action through a structured, multi-level strategy encompassing internal community education, direct interfaith engagement, and broader societal influence. Its first strategic track focuses on Intra-Community Education and Capacity Building, aimed at preparing the Muslim community itself for constructive engagement in a plural society. This involves publishing and disseminating foundational texts on the "Islamic Concept and Basis for Tolerance and Coexistence" in Sinhala and Tamil, conducting awareness programs, seminars, and Friday sermons for local leaders across various districts, providing specialised training for *ulama* and resource persons, and organising guidance workshops for Muslim university students who often first encounter other communities in this setting.[44]

The second track is dedicated to Inter-Religious Dialogue and Relationship Building, which seeks to build direct trust and personal bonds with leaders and members of other faith communities. Key activities include organising joint trips and dialogues between young Buddhist monks and Muslim *ulama* to foster personal rapport, holding sustained meetings with influential religious leaders such as Ven. Prof. Kumburugamuwe Vajira Thero and Hindu priests, and convening multi-religious meetings in riot-affected areas to appeal for calm and rebuild trust. The third strategic track involves Strategic Engagement with Opinion Leaders and Institutions, focusing on influencing public discourse and policy through key societal actors and institutional reform. This encompasses building long-term relationships with Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) like journalist Victor Ivon and Buddhist activist Br. Charles Thomas, leading joint peace initiatives, developing a proposed reformed curriculum for Arabic madrasahs to integrate coexistence principles into Islamic education, participating in national forums and liaising with state bodies, and creating overarching strategic documents, such as the "Road Map to Co-Existence," along with practical guidelines for member organisations.[45]

This structured yet adaptive approach allows the NSC to operate as a critical "behind-the-scenes" actor in Sri Lanka's interreligious landscape. By leveraging its inclusive structure—which brings together diverse Muslim voices from Sufi orders to professional associations—the NSC aims to present a united front in external dialogues, enhancing its credibility as a representative

[43] See about us: https://nationalshoora.com/about-us/
[44] MR Fathima Afra MR, and Thameem Ushama. "Role of the National Shūrā Council (NSC) in establishing religious coexistence in Sri Lanka." *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 8, no. 5 (2023): 111-132.
[45] MR Fathima Afra MR, and Thameem Ushama. "Role of the National Shūrā Council (NSC) in establishing religious coexistence in Sri Lanka." *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 8, no. 5 (2023): 111-132.

interlocutor. However, the NSC's work faces profound challenges. Its operations have been severely constrained by a persistent lack of funding, relying on private donations and volunteer work, leaving strategic plans such as the *madrasah* curriculum reform unimplemented. Furthermore, the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks precipitated a crisis: member organisations were suspended, key individuals were detained for questioning by the Criminal Investigation Department, and the Council's activities ground to a near standstill amid intense scrutiny and frozen resources.[46] Despite these setbacks, the NSC represents a crucial attempt at strategic, civil society-led peacebuilding. Thameem Ushama and Fathima Afra, who have closely studied the NSC, conclude that such platforms are vital for "fostering religious coexistence in Sri Lanka," even as they must navigate external Islamophobic narratives, internal coordination challenges, and a difficult political climate.

Apart from these two prominent organisations, several other Muslim groups have also joined broader coalitions for peace and human rights in Sri Lanka. For example, the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (MCSL) – a national advocacy group – was a signatory to the Interfaith Statement on Peace and Reconciliation in 2011, which urged the government to implement recommendations for post-war reconciliation (such as addressing grievances of all communities). The MCSL and others have lobbied for legal reforms conducive to religious harmony, such as stronger laws against hate speech and more equitable policies on religious holidays and curricula. While progress on these fronts has been slow, the involvement of Muslim voices ensures that their community's concerns (and willingness to cooperate) are on record. Notably, during the constitutional reform debates of 2016-2018, Muslim representatives (politicians and civil groups) supported proposals to enshrine minority rights and secular principles that protect all religions equally. This stance aligned them with moderate elements of other communities and showcased a Muslim commitment to an inclusive national framework, rather than sectarian self-interest.

It can be concluded that Muslim organisations have contributed to peacebuilding by engaging with society outside their community. They use dialogue, education, and advocacy to resolve misunderstandings and work on national issues. These efforts highlight an often-missing narrative: that the Muslim community is committed to peace and collaborating with other religions to promote Sri Lanka's diversity. They act as bridges, sometimes mediating, other times creating emotional and intellectual links through discussions and initiatives. While these efforts can improve, they have laid a foundation for policymakers and communities to build a more reconciled Sri Lanka.

The National Shoora Council represents one of the most comprehensive Muslim-led attempts to institutionalise coexistence and interreligious engagement in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, its effectiveness has been constrained by structural and organisational challenges. The Council's dependence on voluntary participation and limited financial resources has restricted the sustainability of many of its initiatives. Furthermore, while the NSC has developed ambitious strategies for coexistence and social harmony, several proposed reforms have remained unimplemented due to insufficient institutional support. The post-Easter security environment further weakened its operational capacity, demonstrating how external political developments can

[46] Ibid.

significantly undermine civil society peacebuilding efforts. These realities suggest that meaningful peacebuilding requires not only community commitment but also supportive political and institutional environments.

Grassroots Initiatives and Community Engagement

At the community level, Muslims have actively participated in and often led various grassroots initiatives aimed at fostering trust and cooperation among religious groups. These local efforts are significant in Sri Lanka, where many villages and towns are multi-ethnic, and day-to-day harmony depends on interpersonal relations. In ethnically and religiously diverse regions of Sri Lanka, such as the Eastern Province and urban centres like Colombo and Kandy, local actors have pioneered grassroots dialogue platforms to address grievances and prevent the escalation of communal conflict. Following the civil war, civil society organisations, including the National Peace Council, facilitated the establishment of District Interreligious Committees (DIRCs) in numerous districts as a structured mechanism for sustaining peace.[47] These committees have ensured significant Muslim representation, with local *Moulavis* (Islamic scholars), educators, and business leaders regularly joining Buddhist monks, Hindu priests, and Christian clergy in dialogue.[48]

These committees function as vital early-warning and rapid-response systems within their communities. When local tensions surface—perhaps over a dispute concerning a place of worship or a contentious public event—the committee convenes swiftly to mediate, clarify misunderstandings, and de-escalate potential violence. Evidence suggests that Muslim members often assume a crucial bridging role in these forums, leveraging their frequent bilingualism and extensive commercial networks across ethnic lines to facilitate communication and build trust.[49] Beyond formal mediation, these interpersonal networks foster shared community practices that accumulate vital social capital. In many areas, this has manifested in symbolic gestures of solidarity, such as mosques inviting clergy of other faiths to attend Islamic festivals to exchange greetings and offer joint prayers for national peace. While seemingly small-scale, these repeated interactions build a reservoir of personal relationships and mutual goodwill across religious lines, creating a resilient social fabric that can help communities withstand future crises.

A particularly encouraging development has been the involvement of Muslim youth and women in peacebuilding. Recognising that women often act as peace nurturers in families and communities, some women's organisations have taken proactive steps in the country. In the southern city of Matara, a group of women, including Muslims, formed a network that annually celebrates a "Peace Day" with activities open to all communities, such as cultural shows and joint charity drives. These Muslim women, many of them professionals like teachers and social workers, not only organise events but also write letters and articles to Sinhala-language newspapers

[47]Aruna Jayathilaka and Mohamed Ansari, "Role of Religious Leaders in Reconciliation Process in Sri Lanka." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)* 3 (2019). 296.
[48] MR Fathima Afra MR, and Thameem Ushama. "Role of the National Shūrā Council (NSC) in Establishing Religious Coexistence in Sri Lanka." *Al-Itqan: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies* 8, no. 5 (2023): 111-132.
[49] National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, "Annual Report 2020: Consolidating Reconciliation and Coexistence through Inter Religious Committees," (Colombo: NPC, 2021)

addressing misconceptions about Islam – a courageous effort to engage the Sinhalese majority in their own language directly.[50] They argue that women possess patience and empathy that are valuable in peacebuilding, and indeed their work has been noted for helping to humanise the image of Muslims in the eyes of some Sinhalese residents by countering hateful stereotypes with common humanity and friendship.

Similarly, Muslim youth groups have become instrumental in fostering post-war reconciliation through practical collaboration. In the aftermath of the conflict, young Muslim volunteers from districts like Ampara joined Tamil and Sinhalese peers in joint community service projects, such as rebuilding houses and cleaning wells in war-torn villages.[51] These shared efforts not only aided physical recovery but also built inter-ethnic camaraderie and dismantled prejudices among a generation weary of division. Furthermore, initiatives supported by organisations such as the National Peace Council have positioned Muslim youth as "peace ambassadors," facilitating exchange programs in which they travel across Sri Lanka to share experiences and learn about other cultures.[20] Through these sustained, person-to-person engagements, both Muslim women and youth contribute to the accumulation of social capital and grassroots solidarity, which forms the essential bedrock for any sustainable peace.

Another significant contribution is through social welfare and development projects that transcend religious boundaries. Muslim charities and NGOs, often motivated by Islamic charitable principles (*zakat* and *sadaqa*), have consistently extended aid to non-Muslims, building substantial grassroots goodwill. This was evident during the civil war and its aftermath, when Muslim-owned businesses and mosques provided humanitarian relief to internally displaced persons from all ethnic and religious communities.[52] Following the devastating 2004 Tsunami, which affected coastal populations indiscriminately, Islamic relief organisations—both local and international—were prominent first responders. They delivered emergency aid in Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking villages, rebuilt schools and houses regardless of religion, and coordinated closely with Buddhist and Christian groups.[53] Furthermore, in the war-torn Eastern Province, Muslim NGOs such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Council and various community-based societies have implemented educational programs openly accessible to all ethnic groups.[54] These initiatives address practical issues like educational inequality while fostering daily interaction across communal lines, thereby quietly repairing a social fabric torn by prolonged conflict.

Through these grassroots engagements, the Muslim community has demonstrated a commitment to what can be called everyday peacebuilding – the kind of trust-building that happens not in grand political agreements but in the daily lives of people. These efforts model coexistence

[50] Ibid
[51] National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, "Annual Reports 2018 - 2020: Consolidating Reconciliation and Coexistence through Inter Religious Committees," (Colombo: NPC)
[52] A.R.M. Imtiyaz, S. Ratnajeevan H. Hoole, Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, and V. Ameerdeen, "Muslims in post-war Sri Lanka: An Opportunity Lost for Conflict Transformation." *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 7 (2015): 82.
[53] M.W. Amarasiri de Silva, "Ethnicity, Politics and Inequality: Post-tsunami Humanitarian Aid Delivery in Ampara District, Sri Lanka." *Disasters* 33, no. 2 (2009): 260-262; Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, "Muslim perspectives on the Sri Lankan conflict." (Washington: East-West Centre, 2007).
[54] International Crisis Group. (2011). *Sri Lanka: Aid and Peacebuilding in the Eastern Province*. Asia Report No. 215, 12-13.

and provide hopeful examples that differences of creed need not translate into discord. They also show the agency of marginalised groups: despite being a minority and sometimes victims of violence themselves, Muslims in Sri Lanka have not retreated into isolation. Many have instead chosen the path of constructive engagement, showing resilience and initiative to improve relations with their neighbours. In doing so, they contribute vitally to the nation's overall peace.

Challenges Faced by Muslims in Peacebuilding

Despite the positive contributions outlined above, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka faces several significant challenges in their peacebuilding efforts. These challenges are both external (stemming from the broader socio-political environment and inter-community relations) and internal (originating from issues within the Muslim community itself). A clear understanding of these obstacles is vital, as it emphasises why progress is difficult and identifies which factors must be addressed to enable more effective Muslim engagement in promoting interfaith harmony.

External Challenges

Muslim peacebuilders in Sri Lanka operate within a challenging external environment marked by three interconnected pressures: sociopolitical marginalisation, pervasive Islamophobia, and persistent ethno-religious tensions. First, Muslims often face marginalisation in the post-war national narrative, where public discourse, shaped by nationalist media and politics, can portray them through negative stereotypes—as economic schemers or disloyal foreigners.[55] This rhetoric isolates the community and erodes its credibility, forcing Muslim advocates to rely on allies from other communities to amplify their messages for tolerance, as their own calls are frequently dismissed as self-serving. Second, this marginalisation is compounded by rising global and local Islamophobia. Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist groups have actively propagated baseless conspiracy theories, leading to boycotts of Muslim businesses and mob violence, as seen in 2018.[56] The 2019 Easter bombings by a radical fringe group catastrophically damaged interreligious trust. In the aftermath, broad state security measures—including investigations of Muslim institutions and detentions of activists—conflated religious piety with extremism, alienating the wider Muslim community and forcing peacebuilders into a defensive posture of constantly proving their

[55] See Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem, "Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict" (Washington: East-West Centre, 2007).

[56] For further information, see Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky and M. Moniruzzaman. "The Muslim Minority-Phobia in Context: A Critical Study on Majoritarian Ideology and the Structural Roots of Anti-Muslim Phenomenon in the Post-War Sri Lanka." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 41, no. 4 (2021): 719-729; Seeni Mohammed Aliff, "Post-war Conflict in Sri Lanka: Violence Against Sri Lankan Muslims and Buddhist hegemony." *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 59 (2015): 109-125; Sithy Rifa Mahroof, and Ahamed Sarjoon Razick. "Misconceptions in the Sinhala Buddhist-Muslim Conflict in Sri Lanka: A New Perspective on Ethnic Conflict in the Post-colonial Era." *Esensia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 24, no. 2 (2023): 124-133; Muhammad Saekul Mujahidin, "Islamophobia and Acts of Extremism Against Muslim Minorities in Sri Lanka Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Alfuad: Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan* 7, no. 1 (2023): 52-70.

patriotism.[57] Third, underlying ethno-religious fractures beyond the Buddhist-Muslim dynamic create a complex landscape. The civil war's end in 2009 refocused Sinhalese nationalist attention onto Muslims, while in the North and East, tensions between Tamils and Muslims over land resettlement and political representation persist. For instance, disputes in Jaffana and Mannar over land released by the military highlighted zero-sum perceptions that complicate grassroots reconciliation, making Muslim peace initiatives viewed with suspicion by Tamil neighbours.[58] Collectively, these challenges—marginalisation, Islamophobia, and multi-communal tensions—limit Muslim peacebuilding by restricting political influence, imposing physical dangers, and exhausting emotional resources. Recognising these structural barriers is vital for other stakeholders to promote genuine inclusion and reduce hostility that hinders sustainable reconciliation.

Internal Challenges

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka faces significant internal challenges that hinder its peacebuilding efforts. The main issue is sectarian division. Although mainly Sunni, the community is divided by ideological splits between traditional Sufi orders and reformist groups like Salafis, leading to disputes over religious practices and mosque control, such as the 2006 clash in Kattankudy.[59] This fragmentation weakens a unified Muslim voice in interreligious dialogue and provides ammunition for external critics who equate religious conservatism with radicalisation. Balancing traditional values with modern peacebuilding presents another hurdle. Conservative elements within the community often resist progressive approaches, whether in public initiatives or collaborations with secular or Western-funded NGOs. Proposals to reform madrasa curricula to include interfaith education face delays due to concerns about syncretism, requiring advocates to carefully frame such changes within Islamic principles to gain clerical support. Furthermore, Muslim peacebuilding organisations grapple with severe resource constraints and limited political influence. Unlike some well-funded Buddhist or Christian institutions, Muslim civil society operates with minimal budgets, and international donor funding can provoke accusations of foreign interference or allegiance.[60] Politically, despite being represented, Muslims have limited influence in national reconciliation frameworks, having been historically excluded from major peace processes.[61] This lack of clout means early warnings about intercommunal tensions are often ignored until violence erupts. These internal dynamics—sectarian divisions, traditionalist caution, and structural limitations—force Muslim peacebuilders into a reactive posture, one that manages

[57] International Crisis Group. "*Sri Lanka: Keeping the Peace After the Easter Bombings*." Asia Asia Report N°302, 27 September 2019.
[58] A.R.M. Imtiyaz, S. Ratnajeevan H. Hoole, Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, and V. Ameerdeen, "Muslims in Post-war Sri Lanka: An Opportunity Lost for Conflict Transformation." *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 7 (2015): 83-84.
[59] Dennis B. McGilvray, "Sri Lankan Muslims: Between Ethno-nationalism and the Global Ummah." *Nations and nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 45-64.
[60] International Crisis Group. "*Sri Lanka: Keeping the Peace After the Easter Bombings*." Asia Asia Report N°302, 27 September 2019.
[61] Dennis B. McGilvray and Mirak Raheem. "Muslim perspectives on the Sri Lankan conflict" (Washington: East-West Centre), 2007.

crises and defends their community's integrity, thereby diverting energy from sustained reconciliation work and contributing to activist burnout.

Opportunities for Enhanced Muslim Engagement in Peacebuilding

Looking ahead, there are numerous opportunities that, if effectively utilised, could bolster the Muslim community's role in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. These opportunities build on the community's strengths and core values while harnessing broader societal changes and resources. By capitalising on these chances, Sri Lankan Muslims – in partnership with others – can help steer the country towards a more sustainable and inclusive peace.

A key opportunity lies in strengthening the application of Islamic values as a basis for harmony. The community can more actively translate Islamic principles of justice (ʻadl), compassion (rahma), and coexistence into public dialogue. For example, organising large-scale interfaith iftar gatherings during Ramadan, where Qur'anic passages honouring figures like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are shared, can demystify Islamic practice and foster bonds. Similarly, Muslim leaders can contribute articles to Sinhala and Tamil media explaining Islamic rituals in universal ethical terms as a commitment to sharing with the impoverished of all religions. Moreover, the Quranic call to "stand firmly for justice" (4:135) can motivate Muslim youth to engage in cross-community advocacy on issues such as corruption and the rule of law, fostering trust beyond community boundaries. Educational reforms within madrasas, including modules on Sri Lanka's history of Buddhist-Muslim coexistence, can also prepare younger generations to be confident ambassadors of peace. Framing peacebuilding within Islamic theology as ibadah (worship) mobilises devout energy and clerical influence for sustained reconciliation efforts.

Another significant opportunity is to expand and institutionalise interreligious dialogue and partnerships. Moving beyond ad hoc meetings, Muslims can advocate for a formalised National Interreligious Peace Council with a mandate to advise the government and deploy multi-faith delegations to mediate local disputes. At the grassroots level, proactive collaboration on shared welfare projects—such as mosques and temples co-sponsoring blood drives or environmental clean-ups—can transform friendly relations into lasting trust. Particularly promising is the targeted inclusion of youth and women. Finally, leveraging international networks with global interreligious/interfaith organisations and gaining insights from multi-religious societies can offer both moral backing and practical models for local initiatives. In essence, these opportunities focus on two complementary strategies: proactively presenting peacebuilding as an expression of Islamic identity and systematically integrating Muslim community actors within multi-religious civic frameworks. By doing so, Muslims can reinforce their role as essential partners in shaping a Sri Lankan identity where religious diversity is an asset, not a threat.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sri Lankan Muslims have played a meaningful role in fostering interreligious peacebuilding and reconciliation through religious leadership, civil society initiatives, humanitarian engagement, and grassroots dialogue. Drawing upon Islamic principles of justice, compassion, and coexistence, Muslim organisations have sought to strengthen social cohesion and rebuild trust among religious communities in the aftermath of conflict and communal tensions.

However, the findings also reveal that these contributions should not be viewed uncritically. Muslim peacebuilding efforts continue to face significant structural and organisational constraints, including Islamophobia, political marginalisation, limited resources, and internal community divisions. Moreover, many initiatives remain reactive and localised, restricting their broader societal impact. Consequently, the effectiveness of Muslim peacebuilding efforts depends not only on the commitment of Muslim actors themselves but also on the willingness of state institutions, religious leaders, and civil society organisations from all communities to support inclusive and participatory reconciliation processes.

Future research should move beyond descriptive accounts of interreligious engagement and examine the measurable outcomes of peacebuilding initiatives. Comparative studies involving Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim organisations would further enrich understanding of the role of religion in promoting sustainable peace in plural societies. Ultimately, the experience of Sri Lankan Muslims illustrates both the potential and limitations of faith-based peacebuilding, highlighting the importance of collective responsibility in nurturing a peaceful and inclusive national future.

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