

Muslim Civil Society, Islamophobia and the Quest for Social Cohesion in Post-War Sri Lanka: A Critical Survey

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Muslim civil society organizations (MCOs) in promoting social cohesion in post-war Sri Lanka. Using Thania Paffenholz's analytical framework, the paper analyses how MCOs function as key actors in social integration, dialogue facilitation, and peacebuilding. The initiatives of major organizations, such as the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), National Shoorā Council (NSC), and Sri Lanka Jama'athe Islami (SLJI), are evaluated through Paffenholz's categories of protection, socialization, and advocacy. Findings show that these organizations have contributed to rebuilding trust, promoting interfaith dialogue, and strengthening democratic and ethical values within the Muslim community. Their interventions have helped prevent reactionary violence during periods of communal tension and encouraged constructive engagement with other religious groups. However, their efforts are often undermined by Islamophobic narratives, revealing the major challenge in current peacebuilding approaches. The study concludes that with strategic recalibration and broader partnerships, MCOs hold significant potential to act as agents of national healing and long-term social transformation in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Muslim civil society organizations (MCOs), Social cohesion, Strategic initiatives, Interfaith relations, Islamophobia, ACJU.

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Müslüman Sivil Toplumu, İslamofobi ve Savaş Sonrası Sri Lanka'da Sosyal Uyum Arayışı: Eleştirel Bir İnceleme

Öz

Bu çalışma, özellikle 2019 Paskalya bayramı saldırıları sonrası döneme odaklanarak, savaş sonrası Sri Lanka'da sosyal uyumu teşvik etmede müslüman sivil toplum kuruluşlarının (MSTK) rolünü incelemektedir. Makale, Thania Paffenholz'un *Sivil Toplum ve Barış İnşası: Eleştirel Bir Değerlendirme* adlı eserindeki analitik çerçevesini kullanarak, müslüman sivil toplum kuruluşlarının sosyal entegrasyon, diyalog kolaylaştırıcılığı ve barış inşasında kilit aktörler olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü analiz etmektedir. Bütün Seylan Cem'iyyetü'l-ulemâ (ACJU), Ulusal Şura Konseyi (NSC) ve Sri Lanka Cemâat-i İslâmî (SLJI) gibi başlıca kuruluşların girişimleri, Paffenholz'un koruma, sosyalleştirme ve savunuculuk kategorileri aracılığı ile değerlendirilmektedir. Bulgular, bu kuruluşların güveni yeniden inşa etmeye, dinler arası diyalogu teşvik etmeye ve müslüman toplum içinde demokratik ve ahlaki değerleri güçlendirmeye katkıda bulunduğunu göstermektedir. Müdahaleleri, toplumsal gerilim dönemlerinde tepkisel şiddetin önlenmesine yardımcı olmuş ve diğer dini gruplarla yapıcı etkileşimi teşvik etmiştir. Ancak çabaları genellikle İslamofobik anlatılar ve Tamil topluluklarıyla sınırlı etkileşim sebebiyle sekteye uğramakta ve mevcut barış inşası yaklaşımlarındaki boşlukları ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Çalışma, yeniden stratejik yapılanma ve daha geniş ortaklıklarla, müslüman sivil toplum kuruluşlarının Sri Lanka'da ulusal iyileşme ve uzun vadeli toplumsal dönüşümün temsilcileri olarak hareket etme konusunda önemli bir potansiyele sahip olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müslüman sivil toplum kuruluşları (MSTK), Sosyal uyum, Stratejik girişimler, Güçlü aktör, Dinler arası ilişkiler, İslamofobi.

1. Introduction

The Sri Lankan civil war, which lasted from 1983 to 2009, was primarily fought between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), resulting in approximately 80,000 to 100,000 deaths and significant population displacement.¹ During this war, the Muslim community played a unique role, balancing its relationship with both Tamil and Sinhala populations and contributing to the country's diverse societal fabric. However, the end of the civil war in 2009 marked the beginning of significant shifts in the socio-political landscape. A surge in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist movements brought about a new wave of ethno-religious tensions, with Muslims increasingly being portrayed as a "new other."² This portrayal intensified following the tragic Easter Sunday bombings in 2019, which further heightened suspicion and anti-Muslim sentiment.³ These developments left the Muslim community

1 Danendri Laleema Senanayake, "Reimagining Victors' Peace in Sri Lanka", 140–58.

2 Sarjoon – Yusoff - Hussin, "Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence", 125.

3 Imtiyaz. "The Easter Sunday Bombings", 3-16.

grappling with isolation, mistrust, and a sense of vulnerability within the fragile post-war dynamic.

The rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric has been a defining feature of post-war Sri Lanka. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups have targeted religious minorities, particularly Muslims, through hate speech, propaganda, and orchestrated violence.⁴ Islamophobia in Sri Lanka represents a systematic pattern of discrimination and violence directed against the Muslim minority, particularly intensifying in the post-civil war period after 2009. A growing body of scholarly research documents recurring manifestations such as campaigns against halal certification, hostility toward Muslim women's religious dress, attacks on mosques, destruction of Muslim-owned businesses, and the controversial forced-cremation policy imposed on Muslim COVID-19 victims. Many analysts link these developments to the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian nationalism and the mobilization of extremist majoritarian right-wing movements that portray Muslims as a demographic and economic threat. Incidents such as the 2014 Aluthgama riots, followed by violence in Ampara and Kandy, illustrate the escalation of this phenomenon, which some scholars describe as the "fourth wave" of Islamophobia in Sri Lanka since the late nineteenth century, revealing deep historical roots shaped by ethnonationalist anxieties and socio-economic competition.⁵

The situation has been compounded by allegations of state complicity or inaction, which have eroded trust between the Muslim community and state institutions. Furthermore, state concessions to Muslim political leaders, while ostensibly aimed at addressing community grievances, have inadvertently deepened divisions by isolating Muslims from other ethnic groups. This isolation has been mirrored by a socio-religious revival within the Muslim community, which, despite its potential for fostering unity, has not been effectively leveraged for peacebuilding or interethnic reconciliation.⁶ 2019's Easter Sunday bombings marked a watershed moment in the trajectory of Muslim relations with other communities in Sri Lanka.⁷ Perpetrated by extremist elements disconnected from

4 Mujahidin, "Extremism and Islamophobia", 213–41.

5 Ali, "Four Waves of Muslim-Phobia in Sri Lanka", 227–42; Sarjoon – Yusoff - Hussin, "Anti-Muslim Sentiments", 125; Mujahidin, "Extremism and Islamophobia", 217–246; Mohamed Zacky Mohamed Fouz - 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* 41/4 (2021): 719–29.

6 Imtiyaz - Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, "Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka", 186–202.

7 Imtiyaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings", 3–16.

mainstream Muslim Organizations and society, the attacks exacerbated fears and distrust toward the Muslim community as a whole.⁸ As a result, the situation of Muslims in Sri Lanka became increasingly uncertain, and a sense of fear began to affect not only individuals but also Islamic movements and Organizations. Fostering mutual and positive engagement between religions, particularly between Buddhists and Muslims, is therefore crucial, with an emphasis on understanding⁹ and dialogue.¹⁰

The rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, increasing religious polarisation, and shifting political dynamics have placed significant pressure on Muslim identity and representation in the national context. In particular, communal riots, the rise of Islamophobic narratives, and the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, followed by a surge in anti-Muslim sentiment, have forced Muslim civil society Organizations (MCOs) to critically reassess and redefine their roles, discourse, and strategies. These developments have compelled MCOs to shift from traditional community-based activities to broader initiatives aimed at promoting national unity and intercommunal harmony. In response to these crises, leading MCOs have launched targeted initiatives to counter extremism, reduce tensions, and build bridges with other communities. Their efforts include public condemnations of violence, strategic dialogue with state institutions and religious leaders, and educational programs to promote a theology of peace and coexistence. As a result, MCOs have become important actors in Sri Lanka's efforts to rebuild social trust and navigate the challenges of pluralism in a post-war context.

Despite the growing engagement of Muslim civil society Organizations (MCOs) in reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives, their contributions have remained largely absent from mainstream post-war reconciliation debates in Sri Lanka. Much of the existing scholarship on and policy discussions around post-conflict reconciliation have primarily focused on state actors, major political movements, and interethnic relations between the Sinhala and Tamil communities, often overlooking the role of Muslim civic actors. More significantly, in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, Muslim civic spaces have increasingly been securitised, with Muslim Organizations and community initiatives frequently viewed through a security lens rather than as constructive contributors to social cohesion. This securitisation has further marginalised the voices and initiatives of

8 Fouz, "Unravelling the Nexus".

9 Ashath, "Peaceful Coexistence", 1-16.

10 Ramli – Ashath - Moghri, "A Comparative Study on the Notion of Dialogue in Islam and Buddhism", 67-110.

MCOs within national reconciliation frameworks. Under such conditions, minority rights are weakened by majoritarian dominance, compelling vulnerable Muslim communities to adopt pragmatic political strategies and develop new ways to engage with majoritarianism.¹¹ Therefore, it has become crucial to critically examine how MCOs have navigated these constraints while promoting reconciliation, intercommunal dialogue, and peaceful coexistence. By analysing their discourses, strategies, and impact, this research seeks to address this intellectual gap, surveying and documenting the role played by Muslim civil society in shaping post-war reconciliation and pluralism in Sri Lanka.

Against this backdrop, this paper provides a critical analysis of the structure, vision, and activities of three selected MCOs (ACJU, NSC, SLJI), examining their contributions to building social cohesion in Sri Lanka. The study's central argument is that MCOs have played a significant role in shaping community responses during periods of heightened tension and polarisation. In particular, these Organizations have contributed to developing counter-narratives to Islamophobia while guiding the Muslim community's response to anti-Muslim hostility in a measured and restrained manner, emphasising dialogue, coexistence, and civic engagement. Through public advocacy, educational initiatives, and intercommunal engagement, they have sought to promote a discourse of peace and pluralism within the national sphere. However, this orientation has also revealed certain limitations. In prioritising reconciliation and mutual engagement, these Organizations have at times placed less emphasis on questions of justice, accountability, and the structural inequalities faced by the Muslim community.

In elaborating this argument, the paper is organized into six main sections. Following this introduction, the second section will provide a brief overview of the research methodology. The third section will provide the study's analytical framework, while section four presents an organizational overview of three selected MCOs: the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the National Shoorā Council (NSC), and the Sri Lanka Jama'at al-Islami (SLJI). Section five critically examines the activities of these organizations in relation to promoting social cohesion in the country. The paper will conclude with a analysis section, followed by an analytical conclusion.

11 Fouz - Moniruzzaman and Ashath, "Strategic imperatives of Muslim leadership in post-war Sri Lanka", 143-161.

2. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of MCOs in fostering social cohesion in post-war Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of the perceptions, strategies, and institutional practices of key actors involved in peacebuilding and community engagement. Previous studies on civil society and peacebuilding have similarly employed qualitative methods to capture the complex social and political dynamics that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative approaches. Such methods are widely used in research examining civil society's contribution to peace processes and post-conflict reconciliation.¹²

Case Studies

The research focuses on three key Organizations: the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the National Shooraa Council (NSC), and the Sri Lanka Jama'athe Islami (SLJI). These Organizations were selected as case studies because they represent three distinct strands within Muslim community leadership and activism in Sri Lanka. The ACJU functions as the leading body of Islamic theologians and the NSC serves as an umbrella platform for Muslim professionals and civil society actors, while the SLJI operates as an Islamic social movement with an organized cadre structure. Examining these Organizations together provides a broader understanding of the diversity of Muslim civil society engagement in post-war reconciliation efforts.

Data Collection

Data for the study were collected through both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with executive members and key representatives of the selected Organizations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed participants to provide detailed reflections on their Organizations' strategies, challenges, and visions for promoting peace and social cohesion while still enabling the researcher to guide the discussion around core research themes. In addition, the study reviewed official organizational documents, reports, and public statements to better understand each MCO's institutional priorities and activities.

Secondary data were drawn from academic journal articles, policy reports, and relevant literature addressing Muslim civil society, post-war

12 Paffenholz, "Civil Society and Peace Negotiations", 43-69.

reconciliation, and peacebuilding initiatives in Sri Lanka. These sources provided broader contextual understanding and enabled the triangulation of findings from interviews and organizational documents.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using a thematic analysis, which enabled the identification of recurring patterns, narratives, and strategies within the activities of the selected Organizations. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for qualitative research focusing on social processes and institutional roles, as it allows the researcher to systematically interpret participants' perspectives while linking them to broader theoretical frameworks on civil society and peacebuilding.

Finally, ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity where required.

3. Civil Society and Social Cohesion: An Analytical Framework

Civil society is defined as a sphere of voluntary action distinct from the state, the private sector, and the economic sphere. It consists of a wide variety of mainly voluntary organizations and associations that pursue different objectives, interests, and ideologies. This study adopts Thania Paffenholz's analytical framework, which she developed in her work *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*. Paffenholz notes that civil society organizations are integral components of social integration and peacebuilding.¹³ She presents a comprehensive analytical framework to explore how civil societies can address challenges and conflicts within divided societies.

Paffenholz identifies seven key functions that civil society organizations perform to engage with fragile social contexts and promote improved conditions. First, she asserts that the primary function of civil society is to protect people from injustices perpetrated by the state and oppressive power centres within a country. When the state fails to safeguard its citizens, civil society takes the initiative to provide safety and support to affected communities. Second, civil society organizations must monitor government actions and provide accurate data to policymakers regarding the human rights situation in society. This monitoring function is

13 Thania Paffenholz (ed.), *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010). 43-69

essential for social protection. Third, advocacy is a crucial role for civil organizations. They represent the demands of communities and mobilize people through peaceful means to apply pressure on governments to address their concerns. Fourth, civil society organizations engage in training and educating the societies and communities with which they work about peace culture and democratic values. This process aims to facilitate attitude change within society, a function known as “in-group socialization.” Fifth, civil society plays a significant role in fostering social cohesion within divided societies. They work to build trust and understanding between communities while developing projects that encourage collaboration and cooperation. The sixth function involves facilitation, where civil society organizations mediate between communities and both local and global entities, including international organizations or rival groups. Finally, civil society organizations also provide essential services to the community when needed, in order to meet the increasing expectations of the populace.¹⁴

There are several limitations to applying Paffenholz’s framework to Muslim civil society groups in Sri Lanka. Primarily, these organizations are community-based and do not operate within failed states or conflict situations. Sri Lanka has been only experiencing communal tensions between Muslims and Buddhists since the end of 30-year civil war. In contrast, the framework Paffenholz provides aims to explore how civil society responds to deeply divided situations or contexts that are on the verge of or immediately post-armed conflict. Nevertheless, this study adapts this framework to analyse the role of MCOs in fostering social cohesion as it helps us to encapsulate the different aspects of their activities.

4. Sri Lankan Muslim Civic Space in Post-War Sri Lanka: Fault Lines, Dynamics and Discourses

Muslim Politics and Ethnic Conflict

Since the early post-colonial period, the Sri Lankan political landscape has been deeply shaped by highly sensitive ethnic politics. Within this context and until the end of the civil war, Muslim political parties largely led and articulated the political cause of Sri Lankan Muslims. From the 1950s to the 1980s, their political engagement was often characterized as a “politics of survival,” as described by Ameer Ali¹⁵ or as “opportunistic politics,” for instance by Shari Knoerzer.¹⁶

14 Paffenholz, *Civil Society and Peacebuilding*, 43-69.

15 Ali, “Politics of survival”, 147.

16 Knoerzer, “Transformation of Muslim Political Identity”, 139.

From the late 1980s onward, the emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) marked a significant transformation in Muslim political culture, shifting it toward a politics of recognition and rights. This shift occurred despite the fact that the party largely operated within the orbit of mainstream political alliances in the country, particularly with parties such as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.¹⁷

During the final decades of the twentieth century, the SLMC played a crucial role in shaping Muslim political consciousness, especially within the context of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Although Muslims were not direct participants in the conflict, they were profoundly affected by its political, human and social consequences.

The Rise of Muslim Civic Space

Following the end of the war, however, the social capital of Muslim political parties gradually weakened, particularly in the face of rising right-wing anti-Muslim hate campaigns.¹⁸ It was at this juncture that Muslim civil society organizations began to emerge more prominently, attempting to respond to the evolving challenges confronting the minority community. Older organizations were revitalized while a range of new civic groups also began to take shape, reflecting a growing effort within the community to mobilize social, political, and advocacy resources beyond the conventional framework of party politics.

The Muslim civil sphere in Sri Lanka has historically been diverse, encompassing religious, social, and rights-based organizations, including women's groups. One of the oldest and most influential institutions is the All Ceylon Jammiyathul Ulama (ACJU), a body of Muslim theologians established in 1924.¹⁹ In addition to this organization, Islamic social movements such as Jamaat-e-Islami and the Salamah Society have also played active roles within the Muslim civic space. Notably, Jamaat-e-Islami, which was established in the 1950s, has been influential in promoting Islamic social and educational initiatives.²⁰ The All Ceylon Young Men's Muslim Association Conference (YMMA), also founded in the 1950s, has also contributed significantly, in particular to youth engagement and community development.²¹ It is important to note that these are only a few of the prominent national-level organizations; many other regional and local organizations also exist and actively contribute to the Muslim civil sphere in Sri Lanka.

17 Sarjoon, "Analyzing the Contributions of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress", 6.

18 Thaheer, "Sri Lanka Muslim Congress", 259.

19 All Ceylon Jammiyathul Ulama, "About Us"

20 Imtiyaz - Thaheer, "Sri Lanka Jama'ath-e-Islami," *Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism*.

21 All Ceylon Young Men's Muslim Association Conference, "Our History".

The Call for Unity

Along with the presence of these diverse organizations, there has been a recurring discourse advocating greater unity among them in order to strengthen collective Muslim representation and empowerment in Sri Lanka. Responding to this call, several national-level umbrella organizations have emerged over time. These include Ithihadul Muslimeen (Unity of Muslims), which emerged in the 1980s, the Muslim Unity Forum established in 2001, and the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka formed in 2005.²²

A recurring pattern can be observed in these calls for unity: they often intensify during periods when the Muslim community faces significant challenges, such as during the civil war, episodes of ethnic violence, or major crises like the 2004 tsunami. The most recent attempt to unify Muslim civil society organizations was the establishment of the National Shura Council in 2013, which sought to coordinate collective responses to the rise of anti-Muslim hate campaigns in the country's post-war context. While these national-level bodies have played key roles in coordinating efforts to address challenges faced by Muslims in Sri Lanka, each organization has also independently contributed to the broader discourse and undertaken various initiatives in response to these issues.

About the Selected Organizations

For practical purposes, this study focuses on three major national-level civil society organizations and examines their responses to the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment and action in the country: the All Ceylon Jammiyathul Ulama (ACJU), the National Shura Council (NSC), and Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami (SLJI).

As one of the oldest Islamic organizations, the ACJU, established in 1924, provides the historical and religious foundation of Muslim civil society in Sri Lanka. Incorporated under Parliamentary Act No. 51 of 2000, it operates through 163 branches across 24 districts, with over 8,000 Islamic theologians as members. Guided by the principle that the '*ulamā*' are the heirs of the prophets, the ACJU emphasizes moral leadership and social guidance. Its objectives include preserving and promoting Islam, fostering unity within the Muslim community, safeguarding socio-economic and cultural welfare, promoting ethnic harmony, and encouraging the study of Arabic and Islamic *shari'a*.²³ Through its educational initiatives, publications, and extensive network, the ACJU has long shaped the religious and social discourse of Sri Lankan Muslims.²⁴

22 Reeza Yehya. Interviewer: Zacky Fouz. Interview, October 7, 2019.

23 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "About Us".

24 Respondent 1, interview with the Researchers, 8 October 2019.

The SLJI, formally established in 1954, addresses ideological and developmental challenges within the Muslim community. Emerging during a period when leftist and secular ideologies were influencing educated youth, SLJI sought to present Islam as a viable worldview capable of guiding both personal and societal life. The organization focuses on three core areas: guiding the community religiously, developing human resources and leadership, and contributing to social and national development through projects and initiatives. The SLJI promotes Muslim unity; fosters values such as love, brotherhood, and humanity; and encourages participation in national development.²⁵ Its strategies, including Islamic education, social service initiatives, and intercommunal engagement, complement the religious authority of the ACJU, extending its influence into grassroots development and community empowerment.

In response to rising anti-Muslim hostility in the post-war period, the NSC was formed in mid-2013 to address pressing contemporary challenges. Muslim leaders identified 132 community concerns, ultimately prioritizing the lack of collective leadership and insufficient understanding of coexistence with other communities. The NSC's constitution reflects these priorities, outlining objectives such as defending Sri Lanka's sovereignty, promoting consultation on Muslim affairs, supporting nation-building, upholding Muslim rights, addressing inequality, fostering inter-ethnic harmony, and responding to threats against Muslims.²⁶ Strategically, the NSC coordinates Muslim organizations, promotes specialization, and maps resources to avoid duplication, strengthening the community's collective resilience in the face of social and political tensions. So, the role of NSC to foster consultation, cooperation and coordination with stake holders on matters pertaining to the general wellbeing, development and progress of the community and the country.²⁷ Through these coordination efforts, the NSC is working on resource-mapping to minimize waste and prevent duplication among Muslim community Organizations.²⁸

Together, the ACJU, SLJI, and NSC demonstrate a multi-layered and interconnected approach within Sri Lankan Muslim civil society, combining historical religious authority, ideological and community development, and strategic contemporary coordination to address social, political, and cultural challenges.

25 Respondent 2, Interview with the Researchers, 29 October 2019.

26 NSC constitution, Preamble, Colombo 2022, p.02

27 NSC Constitution, article 2. P3

28 Respondent 2, Interview with the Researchers, 7 October 2019.

5. Discussion

ACJU's Activities and Initiatives in Promoting Social Cohesion Post-War Sri Lanka

The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) has actively contributed to debates revolving around social cohesion in post-war Sri Lanka through a series of publications, joint declarations, and mediation efforts aimed at promoting peace and understanding among communities.

Confronting Misperceptions through Publications

One of the significant contributions of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) to interreligious harmony in Sri Lanka is its publications related to coexistence, particularly the *Samaja Sangawadaya* (Social Dialogue) series. This collection of books aims to dispel widespread misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, often fuelled by anti-Muslim propaganda. The series addresses topics such as meat consumption, Muslim demographic growth, Islam's expansion and Muslim women's dress code.²⁹ In terms of the objective of the book series, the initial publication notes that "it is fervent hope [sic] creating a social environment where every Sri Lankan can coexist with brotherhood, peace and unity through this series of compilations called 'Social Dialogue' that are based on building mutual understanding."³⁰ It further states that promoting mutual understanding between diverse communities is essential for peace and unity. Without it, negative emotions like suspicion and fear may grow, which no faith supports. Thus, fostering social cohesion through dialogue and learning about all religions is crucial for strengthening reconciliation.³¹

In another work that discusses the increasing number of mosques in Sri Lanka, the ACJU advises the Muslim community to pay serious attention to the socio-religious sensitivities of multicultural societies. The work emphasises responsible planning, religious sensitivity, and the importance of ensuring that development strengthens unity rather than causing misunderstanding or division. It encourages Muslims to prioritise social harmony, rationality, and community needs when building religious institutions. In a multi-ethnic society, the actions of one community must reflect an awareness of the sensitivities and perceptions of others.³² In all, the ACJU has published six publications under the *Samaja Sangawadaya*

29 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "Publications".

30 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, *Social Dialogue Towards Building Unity and Coexistence: Animal Slaughter and Meat Consumption* (Colombo: ACJU, n.d.), 14.

31 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, *Animal Slaughter*, 2.

32 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, *Social Dialogue Towards Building Unity and Coexistence: The Extensive Building of Masjids in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: ACJU, n.d.).

label, including on population issues, Al-Qaeda, *jihād*, and women's dress code. However, a major limitation of these publications is their accessibility and reach.

The document on *Baseless Allegations*, another important work of the ACJU, examines various claims made against Islam, emphasising a trend among anti-Islamic critics who endeavour to depict the faith negatively through falsehoods and sensationalism, particularly on social media. It emphasises the historical context and peaceful coexistence of Sri Lankan Muslims with other communities for over a millennium. The document argues that misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Qur'ānic verses contributes to unjust criticism, and encourages readers to seek knowledge from qualified sources rather than anti-Islamic rhetoric. Lastly, it calls for mutual respect and understanding among all communities in Sri Lanka, advocating for an environment of peace and brotherhood. The book invites everyone to execute an intellectual analysis of Qur'ānic verses by visiting websites and reading compilations produced by qualified persons, especially when approaching those verses that have been misused by racists who give false, distorted, and erroneous translations and commentaries without the knowledge and skill needed for in-depth study.³³

Another key contribution of the ACJU to social cohesion in Sri Lanka was its Sinhala translation of the Qur'ān, which aimed to make the message of Islam accessible to a wider audience. Recognising Sinhala as the country's official language and the increasing number of Sinhala-speaking Muslims, the ACJU initiated this translation effort in 2010, ensuring that the text remained faithful to its original meaning while being easily understandable.³⁴ The translation process involved over 50 scholars proficient in Sinhala, with meticulous proofreading and expert consultation to ensure accuracy. To enhance accessibility, the ACJU also launched a digital version of the Sinhala Qur'ān, available for free download via its official website and platforms like the Google Play Store. This initiative not only provides Sinhala-speaking Muslims with a reliable translation of the Qur'ān but also serves as a resource for non-Muslims interested in understanding Islam directly from its primary scripture.

Declarations on Co-existence, Extremism, and Muslim Unity

Since the end of the civil war, Muslims have been portrayed as new enemies of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movement. This has resulted in widespread anti-Muslim propaganda that has pushed the Muslim

33 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, *Compilation of Responses to the Baseless Allegations Towards Islam (English)* (Colombo: ACJU, n.d.), 53.

34 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "ACJU Sinhala Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an".

community to the margins of society. In response to these actions, the ACJU announced three important declarations focused on co-existence, extremism, and Muslim unity. The declaration on co-existence emphasizes that Muslims should not retaliate against far-right Islamophobic propaganda. Instead, it advocates for disregarding such allegations and working towards social harmony and mutual understanding. The ACJU encouraged Muslims to engage with other communities to better understand their cultures while also sharing aspects of Muslim culture with them. It also advocated that Muslim and Islamic organizations prioritise projects that foster social harmony.

The ACJU's declarations, particularly the one denouncing extremism and radical interpretations of Islam, have been strategic in countering narratives associating Islam with violence. Recognising the dangers posed by extremist ideologies, the ACJU has consistently distanced the Muslim community from any form of fanaticism or violence, thereby strengthening trust between Muslims and other communities in the country. This declaration explicitly condemned extremist groups such as ISIS, categorically stating that their actions are completely incompatible with the teachings of Islam.³⁵ Moreover, it reaffirmed the Sri Lankan Muslim community's commitment to national unity, respect for the country's constitution, and dedication to peaceful coexistence with people of all faiths and ethnicities. The declaration also urged the government to take action against individuals involved in extremist activities and called for responsible media reporting to prevent communal tensions.

Another important observation made by the ACJU is that theological and jurisprudential issues within MCOs could contribute to the rise of Islamophobic tendencies if these organizations do not properly manage intracommunity relationships. For instance, some Islamic groups have used their theological and jurisprudential disagreements to attack and counterattack each other, which creates disunity within the community. In response, the ACJU has published a declaration advising Muslim organizations and religious groups to adhere to ethical guidelines during disagreements and to practice Islam in a manner that respects the multicultural context of Sri Lanka.

Mediations

In the last two decades, ACJU has been playing a key role in mediating conflicts between the Muslim community and various stakeholders of the state and other religious communities. These mediation efforts have

35 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "Declaration Against ISIS".

intensified since 2012, after the emergence of Islamophobic movements that tried to tarnish the image of Muslims among the majority Buddhist community. To take post-Easter Sunday developments as a case study, the ACJU engaged in mediation efforts to address tensions and mistrust between the Muslim community and the Buddhist majority.³⁶ Recognising the potential for communal tensions, ACJU issued guidelines urging Muslims to maintain patience, adhere to legal protocols, and foster harmonious relations with other communities. Specifically, they named misinformation spread through social media as the primary source of heightening communal tensions. Their guidelines emphasised the importance of verifying information before sharing it on social media to prevent the spread of misinformation. Additionally, the ACJU coordinated with national leaders, including the president and prime minister, to ensure the safety and rights of Muslims, highlighting that the entire Muslim community condemned the attacks and extended full cooperation with government security measures.

In addition to its post-Easter Sunday mediation efforts, the ACJU has a history of proactive engagement with Buddhist leaders to foster interfaith understanding. It has likewise organised engagement with Christian leaders and religious scholars, including Cardinal Malcom Ranjith,³⁷ and the visits have been continued.³⁸ Similarly, it has organised visits to Buddhist *vihāras* and met with monks and community leaders to address misconceptions about Islam and Muslims.

From the beginning, the ACJU has consistently engaged with religious leaders across communities, responding with empathy and unity according to the situation and need. This approach was evident when a delegation from the ACJU visited Ven. Professor Kamburugamuwa Vajira Thero, following his accident; they were warmly received and engaged in a cordial discussion on the importance of coexistence.³⁹ Similarly, in times of national sorrow, the ACJU has expressed deep condolences, such as in their tribute to the late Ven. Dr. Bellanwila Wimalaratana Nayake Thero, honouring his efforts toward peace and extending sympathies to all Sri Lankans, irrespective of caste, creed, or religion.⁴⁰ These efforts

36 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "Report on Post-Easter Attacks: ACJU Proceedings".

37 The ACJU first visited Malcom Ranjith on 21 April 2019, soon after the Easter Sunday attack.

38 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "Report on Post-Easter Attacks: ACJU Proceedings".

39 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "ACJU Visits Ven. Professor Kamburugamuwa Vajira Thero".

40 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, "Message of Condolence on Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana Thero".

have played a crucial role in promoting dialogue, dispelling fears, and strengthening communal harmony in Sri Lanka. The ACJU also extended its mediation efforts by visiting its regional branches to offer guidance to ‘ulamā’ around active engagement with key opinion leaders, non-Muslim religious figures, and community representatives. These visits aimed to encourage constructive dialogue, address local concerns, and build trust among different religious communities. After these meetings, the ACJU made efforts to distribute its publications, ensuring that materials countering misconceptions about Islam reached a wider audience.

The National Shoorā Council (NSC) and Strategic Co-existence

The Need for a Holistic Strategic Plan

The emergence of the National Shoorā Council (NSC) was a direct response to the evolving inter-communal tensions in post-war Sri Lanka. NSC understands that the challenges faced by Sri Lankan Muslims cannot be addressed through temporary measures or mere reactions to the aftermath of the civil war. Instead, there needs to be a comprehensive strategic reflection on the culture, lifestyle, convictions, interactions, political choices, and education systems of the Muslim minority community. To achieve this, the NSC holds that Muslim civil society leadership must develop a systematic resource-building approach that considers future developments.

The NSC has taken up co-existence as its key focus area and initiated a project aimed at promoting strategic coexistence. This project emphasises that building social harmony and coexistence between Muslims and other communities requires more than ad hoc discussions and events labelled as efforts for social harmony. It necessitates a strategic intervention. Consequently, the NSC has positioned itself as a provider of expertise in this area among other Muslim Organizations. It has approached all activities within the Muslim community from the perspective of communal coexistence and sought to advise other Organizations on how to promote Islam in a way that best represents the tradition’s core message of peace and harmony.⁴¹

The Strategic Co-Existence Project and Its Implications

To shape the future of communal coexistence between Muslims and other communities, the NSC established a coexistence subcommittee in 2013. This body aimed to address internal divisions within Muslim organizations and to counteract external hostility by fostering peaceful interfaith relations. The subcommittee’s initial task was to combat the “phenomenon of isolation” that has distanced Muslims from the broader

41 National Shoorā Council, “Vision, Mission & Objectives”.

Sri Lankan society and fuelled suspicion. There is a widespread perception that the Muslim community has isolated itself from the socio-political and cultural context of the rest of the country and that Muslims tend to support, empower, and engage primarily within their own community. Various socio-political and religious factors have contributed to the rise of this perception. The NSC coexistence subcommittee was tasked to look into these perceptions and come up with solutions and projects to address them. Through these engagements, NSC provided a collaborative platform for both Muslim and non-Muslim stakeholders to address communal tensions.⁴² Part of this project was to launch a book event for *Srilankawe Agamika Sanhidiyawa or Status of Religious Harmony in Sri Lanka*. The book highlighted the book's message of religious harmony and its relevance to Sri Lanka's pluralistic society.⁴³

Another foundational step designed by the strategic co-existence project was a workshop on the coexistence roadmap, which led to the preparation of a coexistence national policy aimed at guiding the Muslim community's engagement in a pluralistic society. To implement this policy framework, the NSC moved ahead to forge a network of activists or the National Coexistence Team, fostering a dedicated network of advocates for peaceful coexistence island-wide. The team would be responsible for working within and promoting the NSC's co-existence policies in all parts of the country and training community-level leaders on how to better engage with other religious and cultural communities in multicultural settings. Community-level leaders would then translate NSC policies into reality through various projects.

In building their leadership capacity, the NSC conducted Training of Trainers (ToT) Programs to equip the key members of the project with skills to promote interreligious understanding. It also addressed rising misinformation through workshops on allegations against Islam and Muslims, providing participants with tools to counter prejudice. Moreover, the NSC arranged field visits for team members to diverse districts, including Ampara, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Kandy, Kurunegala, and Badulla, to facilitate direct dialogue across communities and institutions such as temples, schools, universities, mosques, and government offices. The NSC subcommittee also proactively sought formal Islamic guidance from the ACJU on matters related to coexistence, ensuring alignment with religious principles.⁴⁴

42 Fathima Afra - Ushama, "Role of National Shura Council", 109-30.

43 National Shoora Council, "The Book Launch of 'Srilankawe Agamika Sanhidiyawa' by Ash Sheikh S.H.M. Faleel".

44 National Shoora Council, "Coexistence Sub-Committee".

Regulating the Religious Space and Education

There has been ongoing debate regarding whether the religious practices of Sri Lankan Muslims have contributed to the rise of Islamophobic tendencies in the country. This perception became more pronounced after the Easter Sunday attacks. While opinions on this matter vary, the NSC decided to intervene by launching several key projects involving religious leadership in Sri Lanka. To this end, the NSC held a consultative forum in Colombo that brought together representatives from Islamic and social reform organizations. The main goal of the event was to explore the historical experiences of Islamic socio-religious movements, discuss their activities, and address their current challenges. Participants debated how these movements should adapt to the specific context of the country. A working group was established to develop plans that emphasized the need for coordinated and context-sensitive Islamic missionary work that would respect national harmony and foster mutual respect between communities.⁴⁵

The NSC recognised the crucial role of Islamic *madrasas* in shaping the attitudes and understanding of young Muslims. Therefore, it initiated curriculum-reform efforts to promote inclusivity and religious tolerance. Through the publication *Islamic Procedures in a Pluralistic Society, Documents for the Syllabus of Arabic Colleges*, the NSC aimed to develop a framework that would produce scholars well-equipped to responsibly guide their communities within a diverse society. This initiative stressed the importance of embedding the principles of coexistence in religious education and training. Following the Easter Sunday attacks, *madrasas* had come under severe scrutiny, with growing anti-Muslim sentiment and calls from sections of the Buddhist community for their closure. Despite this backlash, Islamic Organizations, with support from the Department of Muslim Cultural Affairs, continue to advocate for balanced reform rather than elimination.⁴⁶

In addition to its structured initiatives, the NSC has taken several actions to address emerging socio-political dynamics in line with its overall strategic direction. For instance, when the government launched a national debate on constitutional reform and requested proposals from civil society organizations, the NSC responded by organizing a training workshop on Sri Lanka's Constitution. This workshop focused on the concerns of the Muslim minority and the topic of constitutional reform. It featured lectures from legal and academic experts and concluded with

45 National Shura Council, “சமூக சீர்திருத்தப் பணி (Social Reform Work)”.
46 Fathima Afra - Ushama, “Role of National Shura Council”, 109–30.

the formation of a 10-member committee tasked with drafting a five-phase action plan.⁴⁷ The NSC's final proposal included recommendations for inclusive governance structures, the protection of minority rights, and national integration.

Sri Lanka Jama'ath-e-Islami (SLJI): Evolution and Implications

Ideological Evolution and Focus Shift

The Sri Lanka Jama'ath-e-Islami (SLJI) is an Islamic social movement that has dedicated decades to reforming the Muslim community. The movement has established various institutions and networks to organise and educate the Sri Lankan Muslim population. Its key message emphasised the importance of organised leadership within the community to effectively manage its affairs, ensuring success in areas such as education, development, ethics, and community life. While the SLJI has addressed national issues from its initial period, these themes have not been the central focus of its ideological stance for the last several decades; recently, the SLJI has focused more on Muslim religious education, capacity building, and spirituality within the community.⁴⁸ In 2012, as an Islamic socio-religious movement, the SLJI formally divided its work into three levels: Movement, covering SLJI's members; Society, concerning the Muslim community as a whole; and Country, concerning nation-building and non-Muslim relations. These three levels are considered the ideal, and the SLJI advocates that all Islamic movements in Sri Lanka shift focus accordingly.⁴⁹

The SLJI's ideological evolution has become increasingly apparent as it seeks to adapt to dynamic global and local developments, specifically, the rise of Islamophobia, the securitisation of Islamic Organizations, and accumulated experiences in Islamic social activism. In response to these challenges, the SLJI has aimed to reposition itself as a mainstream social movement that advocates for both the Muslim community's causes and broader national concerns. For example, in a policy document released in 2019, SLJI reaffirmed its commitment to protecting socio-religious and cultural pluralism, promoting social harmony and co-existence, and fostering shared values for just nation-building. Consequently, the movement has incorporated both communitarian issues and national affairs into its working paradigm.⁵⁰ The evolving dynamics of the SLJI have significantly influenced public discourse on communal co-existence and interreligious

47 National Shoor Council, "Training Workshop on the Constitution of Sri Lanka".

48 Respondent 3, Interview with the Researchers, 29 October 2019.

49 Respondent 3, Interview with the Researchers, 29 October 2019.

50 Akbar, *Tomorrows of the Nation*.

understanding between Muslims and other communities in post-war Sri Lanka. Two important initiatives, Ramya Lanka and the Tanweer Academy Project, highlight the nature of the SLJI's recent evolution and its relevance to discussions on social harmony in the country.

Ramya Lanka: A Growing Wing of the SLJI in the National Arena

The SLJI's strategic ideological shift can be clearly observed by examining the activities of one of its main growing wings, Ramya Lanka or "Beautiful Sri Lanka," an independent organization. Established with the vision of fostering a "Prosperous Country, Flourishing Future," Ramya Lanka explicitly notes the expansive nature of its services and activities, indicating its intention to play a role in shaping the future of Sri Lanka. This intention is emphasized in the organization's objectives, which clearly outline five core goals: promoting human welfare, environmental protection, national unity, good governance, and an ethical media culture.⁵¹ The objectives also indicate that Ramya Lanka is not focused on a single issue or aspect but rather aims to include several sub-groups to address a wide variety of national concerns.

Beyond these ideological dimensions, Ramya Lanka has conducted several flagship projects to enhance its national outreach. These projects are primarily organized in collaboration with mainstream state and civil organizations to address key issues shared by all ethnic and religious communities in the country. For instance, the organization has conducted various health and well-being programs at state hospitals like Colombo General Hospital and Puttalam Base Hospital. It has also initiated environmental projects like the Kapruka Saviya and Udal Saviya coconut-tree-planting initiatives, as well as social campaigns like Blood for Humanity and Alcohol & Drug Prevention.⁵²

By observing the organization's recent engagements, it becomes clear that Ramya Lanka has sought collaborations with popular civil society organizations in the country. For example, Ramaya Lanka has developed a collaborative relationship with the National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ),⁵³ a nationally recognised civil society platform.⁵⁴ The NMSJ has acknowledged Ramya Lanka as a strategic partner in disseminating democratic values, peacebuilding, and reconciliation to both grassroots and academic segments of the Muslim community. As part of this

51 Ramya Lanka, "About Us".

52 Ramya Lanka, "About Us".

53 The National Movement for Social Justice aims to bring together the people of the country irrespective of their political affiliations, race, or religion.

54 National Movement for Social Justice, "About Us".

growing partnership, both parties have agreed to launch initiatives such as the Eastern Young Ulama Empowerment Program and Peace and Reconciliation Training Programs in the Ampara District. These upcoming initiatives aim to engage civil society actors, young religious scholars, and community leaders in developing capacities related to democratic participation, pluralism, and intercommunal understanding.⁵⁵

Ramaya Lanka's expansive engagements with mainstream civil society organizations and state institutions tend to send a message that these efforts help the Muslim community to engage in issues with national concerns and thus, as a result, challenge the stereotypical perspectives painted by Islamophobic groups. The initiatives' undercurrent likewise challenges the common view that Islamic movements focus primarily on activities and engagement centred around Muslims.

Tanweer Academy: Interfaith Dialogue through Education

Sri Lankan Muslims primarily speak the Tamil language, which differs from the Sinhala language spoken by the majority Buddhist community. Some social activists have observed that this language barrier has contributed to misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, as there is limited natural communication between the two communities. On the other hand, although Muslims traditionally receive their education in Tamil, there has been a growing trend in recent decades of Muslim students enrolling in Sinhala medium schools, where Islamic culture is less prevalent. Recognising the need for religious education accessible to Sinhala-speaking Muslims and to develop a productive conversation between the two communities, ALM Ibrahim, a former head of the SLJI, initiated the Tanweer Academy.

The Academy trains Islamic theologians and scholars in the Sinhala language. According to its current leadership, "the academy aims to develop Sinhala-medium educated Muslim youth who practice Islam following the Quran and Sunnah, striving to improve the understanding of Islam and remove misconceptions to promote peaceful coexistence and contribute to Sri Lanka's development."⁵⁶ They further note that

Tanweer Academy aspires to be a transformative institution fostering interfaith harmony, academic excellence, and social engagement in Sri Lanka. It seeks to enhance religious understanding among Muslims by broadening their knowledge of other faiths and fostering relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders through structured

⁵⁵ Respondent 3 and Respondent 5, Interview with the Researchers, 9 May 2025.

⁵⁶ Respondent 4, Interview with the Researchers, 9 March 2025.

interfaith dialogues and institutional collaborations. By examining the Academy's current grand scheme, it hopes to provide opportunities for non-Muslims to understand Islam and Muslim culture through educational programs, cultural exchanges, and outreach initiatives. It hopes to develop multiple centres to expand its activities, such as the Tanweer Centre for Teachings and Guidance, the Tanweer Centre for Interfaith Understanding, and the Tanweer Centre for Community Engagement. It integrates academic research, language education, and cultural projects to build bridges across communities. Beyond academia, it also works to establish platforms such as an exhibition centre, a research hub, and media initiatives to amplify its impact.⁵⁷

In putting these initial ideas into practice, the Tanweer Academy has recently launched a new project called the *Darmavabodaya Tiulin Sahajeewanaya* or Coexistence through Religious Understanding exhibition program. The project is an initiative aimed at fostering coexistence by inviting non-Muslims to experience Islamic teachings and practices through exhibitions. This project serves as a platform for promoting interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange, creating an environment of mutual respect and understanding. The current leadership has argued that "by welcoming diverse communities to these exhibition sites, they encourage collaboration, tolerance, and peacebuilding in a society that values harmony among its people."⁵⁸ A recent exhibition garnered considerable public attention and was also featured in mainstream media. Held in Panadura, a city in the western province of Sri Lanka, the event was perceived as an interfaith initiative aimed at educating the public about Ramadan by the organizers.⁵⁹

The academy has also begun building collaborative relationships with Organizations such as Sarvodaya's Shanti Sena, which is widely respected for its grassroots peacebuilding and community dialogue work. The academy views these types of engagements as enablers for meaningful exchanges on shared values like compassion, coexistence, and social justice, helping to bridge gaps between Muslim communities and others.

6. Analysis

Peacebuilding and conflict transformation as a discourse has undergone a significant paradigmatic shift in contemporary scholarship, moving decisively away from rigid, state-centric liberal peace frameworks toward a deeper understanding of grassroots and civil society dynamics. When

57 Respondent 4, Interview with the Researchers, 9 March 2025.

58 Tanweer Academy, "Ramadan Exhibition 2025".

59 Derana TV, "Derana channel aired scenes about Ramadan".

applied to the post-war context of Sri Lanka, this theoretical evolution provides a vital lens through which to conceptualize the efforts of MCOs. While groups such as the ACJU, the NSC, and the SLJI have successfully utilized local religious and civic networks to foster interpersonal trust, an analytical assessment reveals a critical limitation. Their localized peacebuilding efforts remain fundamentally constrained by an inability to dismantle the structural, majoritarian ideologies that perpetuate anti-Muslim violence or hate in the country.

Theoretical Foundations of Grassroots Peacebuilding

To understand the mechanisms employed by Sri Lankan Muslim civil society, it is necessary to contextualize their work within modern conflict transformation theories. Oliver P. Richmond's theory of "peace formation" emphasizes the agency of local societies in divided and fragile states. Richmond posits that sustainable peace dynamics are best established when indigenous actors operate within their customary, religious, and social settings to build networks that transcend ethnonationalist barriers.⁶⁰

This approach is closely complemented by Roger Mac Ginty's concept of "everyday peace," which rejects the notion that societies are rigidly homogeneous. Instead, Mac Ginty argues that communities are fluid mixtures of pragmatists, zealots, and progressive individuals who can forge shared spaces for coexistence through routine social interactions.⁶¹ Furthermore, John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation shifts the focus from simply "solving" a conflict to undertaking a long-term process of transforming the deeply mistrustful relationships between conflicting parties. Lederach argues that true transformation requires addressing the underlying structural inequalities that trigger conflict, prioritizing cultural and interpersonal relationship-building in environments plagued by deep identity-based suspicion.⁶²

Operationalizing Peace: Discourse, Networks, and Civic Expansion

Drawing upon these theoretical frameworks, Muslim civil society organizations in Sri Lanka have actively engineered community-based interventions that contrast sharply with traditional state-led peacebuilding models. These groups leverage their religious authority and social capital to mobilize communities in culturally resonant ways.

One of the primary analytical dimensions of this effort is the strategic production of knowledge aimed at reshaping public discourse and

⁶⁰ Richmond, *Peace Formation*.

⁶¹ Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace", 548–64.

⁶² Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*.

mitigating inter-communal suspicion. The ACJU, for example, has prioritized dismantling misunderstandings about Islam through initiatives like the *Samaja Sangawadaya* (Social Dialogue) series⁶³ and the translation of the Qur'an into Sinhala.⁶⁴ By deliberately presenting Islamic theological concepts in the language of the Sinhalese majority, the ACJU engages in a localized form of peace formation intended to cultivate familiarity and bridge deep-seated linguistic and cultural divides.

Simultaneously, these organizations have worked to institutionalize coexistence through robust grassroots networks. The NSC has established informal infrastructures for peace, such as the Strategic Coexistence Project and the National Coexistence Team, which successfully connect educators, religious leaders, and civic representatives across various districts. From an analytical standpoint, these networks serve as vital mediation mechanisms, empowering local actors to de-escalate communal tensions through direct communication before they can metastasize into widespread violence.

Furthermore, Muslim civil society has strategically expanded its focus beyond internal community grievances to address broader, national civic issues. The SLJI exemplifies this outward shift through its Ramya Lanka initiative and the Tanweer Academy, both of which focus on universal social welfare programs including healthcare services, environmental awareness, and community development. By repositioning themselves within the broader public sphere, these organizations engage in a “layered form of peacebuilding” that simultaneously executes social dialogue, institutional reform, and community mobilization. Ultimately, this multi-faceted approach contributes to the gradual accumulation of shared civic participation and interpersonal trust among diverse ethnic groups.

The Limits of Civic Activism: Structural Violence and Majoritarianism

However, the majoritarianism represents a significant challenge to the peacebuilding efforts of MCOs. This challenge emanates from deeper structural root causes of anti-Muslim hostility, particularly the persistence of majoritarian nationalism that frames minority political and civic engagement as a threat to the dominance of the majority community. Within such a context, the civic initiatives of Organizations such as the ACJU, NSC, and SLJI are frequently politicised and portrayed as undermining majoritarian interests. As a result, these Organizations often become targets of Islamophobic narratives and attacks, which constrain their operational space in the public sphere and limit their

63 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, “Publications”.

64 All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, “ACJU Sinhala Exegesis”.

capacity to build trust and constructive engagement with non-Muslim communities.

7. Conclusion

The evolving role of MCOs in post-war Sri Lanka highlights both the potential and the complexities of community-led peacebuilding in a fractured society. Organizations such as the ACJU, NSC, and SLJI have taken significant steps to address the social and political challenges facing the Muslim community, especially in the aftermath of the 30-year civil war and the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. Their efforts to promote coexistence, counter radicalisation, and advocate for national unity are commendable and reflect a deep commitment to peaceful pluralism. These MCOs have successfully mobilised community-level resources to cultivate interfaith dialogue and civic responsibility. Projects like the National Unity Coalition's coexistence initiative and Ramya Lanka exemplify how civil society can play a vital role in shaping public discourse, guiding vulnerable youth, and easing ethnic tensions. Their work has helped embed a culture of peace within the Muslim community and has encouraged proactive engagement with national narratives of reconciliation.

Nevertheless, this journey is fraught with limitations. The persistence of Islamophobic narratives and majoritarian suspicion continues to marginalise the contributions of these Organizations. Their programs are frequently misrepresented as strategic survival mechanisms rather than sincere outreach initiatives. Additionally, the overwhelming focus on reconciliation often comes at the expense of justice-oriented advocacy. By avoiding deeper engagement with issues of systemic discrimination and equal rights, MCOs risk perpetuating a narrative of passive coexistence rather than transformative justice. The lack of engagement with Tamil communities in the North and East reveals a further critical gap in current strategies. Addressing the tensions between Muslim and Tamil communities—often rooted in competing minority nationalisms—is essential to forging a more inclusive peace. To evolve into truly national agents of cohesion, MCOs must expand their focus beyond the Muslim-Buddhist binary and adopt a more intersectional approach to community relations.

In conclusion, MCOs in Sri Lanka have shown strength and flexibility during difficult times. However, to stay relevant in the future, they need to focus more on promoting thoughtful ideas, forming strong partnerships, and speaking up fairly for their communities and rights. If they combine their efforts for peace with stronger support for justice and rights, as well as work with other communities, they can play an important role in creating a united and diverse Sri Lanka.

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Interview Participants

The study conducted interviews with the following members of the MCO Executive Committee:

1. Mr. Zuhair PC
2. Mr. Riza Yahya
3. Ash-Sheikh Arkam Noramith
4. Mr. Haneez
5. Ash-Sheikh Abdurrahman
6. Mr. Mass L. Usuf (L.L. B)
7. Dr. Saif
8. Ash-Sheikh Mubarak (Madani)

(MCO Executive Committee Members interviewed by the researchers.)