CHAPTER - IV
FORMATION OF THE SLMC

INTRODUCTION

The need for a separate political party for Muslims, especially in the conflict-affected North and East was strongly felt in early 1980s. Since its formation, the strength of the SLMC has increased significantly. This chapter analyses the factors and the forces behind the formation and strengthening of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) as a political party, its principles, objectives, party structure and hierarchical pattern.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section identifies the background of the emergence of the party. The second section describes the objectives and the principles of the party and the party structure, which gives a distinct power distribution and function to the party. The prerogatives of the founder leadership of the party, which was largely responsible for the success of the party in the early stage, is discussed.

FACTORS BEHIND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SLMC

Rise of Muslim Politics on Ethnic Lines

Ethnic tensions became increasingly visible in Sri Lanka since independence in 1948. The scarcity of land and other resources in the absence of technological alternatives, coupled with a sharp population increase contributed to disparities in the economic and social welfare of minority communities, giving rise to ethnic strife. The national and regional parties manipulated the ethnic issues for electoral benefits and political affiliation became largely polarized along ethnic lines.
The conflict began between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. It began over issues such as the use of language, share in state land, and educational and employment opportunities, culminating in the demand first for greater autonomy for the region where the Tamils formed the majority and later for a separate state. Among Muslims, several reasons gave momentum to the rise of the new political force on religious-ethnic lines.

The national parties had an ethnic agenda that favoured the majority ethnic community. A community like the Muslims therefore lacked the space in the national parties to effectively promote Muslim interests at the national and regional level. Since much of Sri Lanka's polity revolved on ethnic issues, when the Muslims organized themselves as a separate political community the development was taken as a matter of course by the rest of the country.

Official Language Act

Before 1944, Sinhala and Tamil had been recognized as official languages. After independence, the "Sinhala only" legislation was brought in through the Soulbury Constitution. The status of the Tamil language, which is the mother tongue of both the Muslims and the Tamils, was thus reduced to second class and the Tamil-speaking people were made second-class citizens. In one stroke, the Sinhalese became the governing and the Tamils and Muslims became the governed.

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When Sinhala became the language of administration, the Muslims in the North, East and South faced discrimination by the Sinhala bureaucrats. In areas of Muslim concentration transport facilities, health aspects, and water distribution were also neglected along with education, in the Government's development schemes. But to win the support for the official language policy from some Muslims leaders, the Government provided more schools and education facilities to the Muslim community. At school, the burden of learning the Sinhala language, the discrimination shown by the Sinhala teachers and the cultural environment of the school led Muslim students to drop out of school. Adding to the Muslims' disenchantment was the campaign launched around this time demanding that even the religious sermons in mosques should be in Sinhala. The younger generation had a hard time searching for religious textbooks in the Sinhala language while the religious scholars were compelled to translate the religious text into Sinhala. Muslim schools that had Tamil as the medium of instruction were deliberately neglected by the Government. After independence, with their nationalization, Sinhala principals were appointed to these school, thus further hampering their development. There was not a single Sinhala medium Muslim institution in the country where a Muslim student could study in that medium right up to the University Entrance.

**Domination by other Communities**

The SLMC was born as an outcome of the realization among the leaders of the Muslim community, who were a powerful force in the mainstream political parties, to have a political voice to address the genuine grievances of the community. The political representatives from the Sinhalese parties were not adequate to fulfil the aspirations of the Muslim community.⁴

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The concept of race in Sri Lanka has been a bane of the Muslim community. Even the Tamils viewed the Muslims as strangers, irrespective of the culture being shared by both communities. The recent discussion about power sharing among the minorities has made the armed revolutionaries of the Tamil community view Muslims as enemies. To stabilize their own identity as opposed to the Sinhala and Muslim identity, they now speak of the Dravidian identity. It was also easy for others to suppress the Muslim identity since the community was divided into Malays, Arab Moors and Indian Moors, the racial wedge between Muslims being conspicuously manifested at the regional level. While other communities were unified either with the support of religion or language, Muslims remained greatly divided. Stratification of the Muslims into different classes also ensured that class interests prevailed over the community’s interests.

Implementation of Land Development Law

After independence large-scale irrigation schemes were launched in the East. Through this so-called ‘dry zone colonization scheme’ and “Green Revolution” scheme, the traditional lands of the Muslims were handed to the Sinhala colonizers. About this irrigation work D.S. Sennanyake said, “When this region is changed into an agricultural area the lands will be distributed 50:50 among the local farmers and settling Sinhalese.” Although Muslims did not receive even one-fourth of their due share, the majority Sinhalese, who constitute 74 per cent of the population, received over 85 per cent of the developed lands. The phenomenal increase in the Sinhalese population has been the result of the state-aided Sinhalese colonization under major irrigation schemes such as the Gal-Oyo Scheme, Ambalam Oya Scheme and Pannala Oya Scheme in the Ampara District, Kantalai Scheme, Ella Scheme,
Morawewa/Muthalikulam Scheme, Padavia Scheme (part) and the Mahadivulwewa/Muthalikulam Scheme in the Trincomalee district.\(^4\)

About the “Gal-Oya scheme” in Ampara District, Chelvanayakam said at the inaugural meeting of his party on 18 December 1949, “Even more dangerous to the Tamil-speaking people is the government’s colonization policy. We have only the beginning of it in Gal-Oya. The land to be irrigated … lies in the Eastern Province. […] There is evidence that the government intends planting a Sinhalese population in this purely Tamil-speaking area.”\(^5\) The Muslims, who were also considered as part of the Tamil-speaking community, were thus threatened by the Government’s colonization policy against the Tamil-speaking community. An example of the effect of the land colonization scheme on the Muslims was the Kantaley Colony scheme. When the scheme commenced, Muslims were engaged in agricultural occupations in about 4000 acres at Tampolagamampathu, Patana. They had been cultivating the lands for over thirty years with Land Development Officer (LDO) permits, but were transferred out without any compensation and their lands were distributed among the Sinhalese people. Sinhalese were settled in the Muslims-majority areas like Pattakachhi division, now known as Akbarpuram. The lands belonging to Muslims of Digavapi in Ampara district were taken over and the Muslim population was evicted. In the 1960s, the Buddhists argued that the lands surrounding Bauddha monuments should be acquired for religious purposes. The commission formed to look into the matter recommended that 500 acres of land should be acquired. The Government


\(^5\) In his Presidential Address delivered at the Inaugural and First Business Meeting of the *Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi* on 18 December 1949 (Colombo), n.d.
instead took over 1000 acres of cultivated lands of the Muslims and flattened the area with bulldozers. The affected Muslims had nowhere to go.6

With this demographic aggression by the Sinhalese, between 1921 to 1981, while the Sinhalese share of the population in the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara increased, respectively, from 4.5 per cent to 33.6 per cent, 1.9 per cent to 3.2 per cent, and 8.2 per cent to 37.6 per cent, the Tamils' share of the population changed, respectively, from 53.2 per cent to 33.8, 68.5 per cent to 70.8 per cent, and 30.5 per cent to 20.1 per cent7. According to the census of 1921, the Sinhalese population in the whole Eastern Province was just 4 per cent. However, at the census of 1981 the proportion of Sinhalese people increased to 25 per cent. The density of the Muslims was reduced in a well-planned manner by merging the densely populated Sinhalese areas of other districts with the districts where Muslims dominated. Thus, the Sinhalese areas of Moneragala district were merged with Ampara district, considerably reducing the Muslim majority in the reorganized district.

In Ampara district, the Muslim votes increased from 37,000 in 1947 to 78,000 in 1980, a little more than twofold increase. The Sinhalese strength in the same period increased from 2,394 to 68,000, a thirty-fold increase. This disproportionate demographic growth could be attributed to an indiscriminate settling of the Sinhalese in the virgin lands of the Eastern Province. Owing to the planned Sinhalese colonization the population of the Muslims scattered to the South and the Muslim

6 Mohideen, n.4.
population in the North and East thinned further. In Puttalam district, the Muslim population was reduced from 31 per cent in 1946 to 9.72 in 1981.8

There are some indications that mainly Sinhalese settlers benefited from the State-sponsored land colonization schemes, especially in the Eastern Province.9 There was considerable resentment among the Tamils and Muslims of the Eastern Province regarding what they perceived as discrimination by the government in the allocation of land under the major settlement schemes and the consequent increase in the Sinhalese share of the population in certain parts of the Province.10 The land settlement policy also adversely affected the Muslims in terms of their electoral strength and created a fear of identity erosion among the Muslims and threatening their distinct culture.

A document published in 1988 by the Political Wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) states:

Given the reality that it is the Muslim people who have suffered most through state aided Sinhala colonization and encroachments in their traditional areas of habitation, our determination to preserve every inch of our homeland itself is an expression of Muslims' grievance and is a tangible step toward protection of Muslim rights. It therefore becomes absolutely vital for all Muslims to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the struggle if they are to safeguard their own land and all that they hold sacred in order to survive as a people.11

The traditional Muslim elites did not, however, regard these issues as serious. Their interests lay in the South. In August 1986, commenting on this state of affairs, the newspaper *The Sun* noted, “The Colombo-based political leadership of the Muslim community are insensitive to the problems faced by the Muslims of the Eastern Province.”

**Discrimination in Educational and Developmental Opportunities**

The revival of Muslim education by Siddi Lebbe advocated religious education in place of secular education. Badiuddin Mahamud, conscious of the grave disabilities of the Muslims, tried hard to give the Muslims their rightful share by constructing new schools, upgrading existing schools, providing for educational equipment and facilities and by appointing teachers and educational officials in proportion to the Muslim population. "The general improvement in education in the country and the special treatment that Muslim education won under Badiuddin Mahamud in the 1970s, the increase of University intake of Muslim students in the late 1970s all led to the emergence of an East coast Muslim intelligentsia who became aware of the true nature of Muslim politics." 

At independence, 60 per cent of the admissions to universities were among the Sinhalese; the figure has now risen to 72 per cent. Comparatively, university admission of the Muslims at independence was 2 per cent but now it has risen only to 4 per cent while their population ratio is 8 per cent. It can be inferred from these

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details that the actions taken for the uplift of the education of the majority community were not similarly extended for the education of the Muslims.¹⁴

As regards the allocation of employment opportunities, although Muslims are 7.6 per cent ethnically, only 3.3 per cent jobs are given to them whereas to the Sinhalese who constitute 74 per cent of the population 84 per cent of employment had been offered. "The slight increase, i.e 3.6 per cent in 1980, in the number of Muslims eligible for public sector did not affect the whole system of public sector employment."¹⁵ In the East, the Muslims in the past, lacking in education could not compete effectively in any field, including the administrative sector. The Tamil authorities in turn made efforts to provide a major share of employment to the Tamils. Since Muslim officers were few in the government departments the Tamil officers were successful in this manoeuvring. In December 1980, Amirthalingam “made allegations in Parliament about discrimination against both Tamils and Muslims in recruitment to government service, producing the following data for the period February 1977 to March 1980: 198 stenographers (135 Sinhalese, 45 Tamils, 35 Muslims), 133 book-keepers (122 Sinhalese, 9 Tamils, 2 Muslims), 3,326 clerks (3,173 Sinhalese, 148 Tamils and 5


¹⁵ It includes the Muslims who are teachers, disguises the paucity of Muslim employees in most categories. With the exception of the categories of teachers, principals and headmasters and draughtsmen, the percentage of public service personal found to be Muslims in 1980 was, in all remaining categories, less than 2.7 per cent. Desegregation by public sector and corporation sector employees’ reveals a similar situation in those sectors. The Marga Institute, “The Muslims of Sri Lanka” (Colombo: Marga Institute, 1986), pp. 132-4.
Muslims). And all the 140 officers recruited into the Sri Lankan Administrative service were Sinhalese.\textsuperscript{16}

In fact, the government gave step motherly treatment to the minority communities, with fewer shares. The reaction and outcome against these injustices, was the birth of Muslim congress, for the long cherished needs of the Muslims for separate party to voice for them.

Muslims of east comparatively lag behind the Muslims of south and of Colombo. Empirically, speaking, the strong middle class that was present elsewhere was absent in the North-East. However, the essential prerequisite for a middle class was laid down by education improvement. In case of their setting in government jobs, a wave of middle class has been launched among these Muslims of East also. When these challenges were posted in front of the Muslim youth in eastern part of Sri Lanka, they did not opt out of their tradition of supporting national Party leaders.

There was an emergence of a new class, or new group of the educated who sought upward mobility and they started to suspect the Muslim political leaders. Who were participating in the national parties, from Eastern province as they were not representing the interest and grievances in the national level also called for the emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslim congress as a political entity at the national level.

Threats to the Security of the Muslim Community

In 1976 when 12 Muslims were killed in a Muslim-Sinhalese clash in Puttalam Mosque, not a single Muslim leader raised the matter in Parliament. Dr. Badiuddin Mahmood was then the Minister of Education, A.L.A Majeed was the Deputy Minister of Broadcasting and I.A. Cader was the Deputy Speaker. It was left to the Federal Party leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam to bring the issue to the floor of Parliament.17 Peter Keuneman joined him in raising his voice for the Muslims.18 It is a matter of whether a group of people bracketed as minorities in a multi ethnic state could talk for themselves or not. In case of communities remaining mute, it could be said that communal formation is unnecessary and prejudicial. Nevertheless, in the reality of Sri Lanka, Muslims who at several instances have to preserve their identity as Muslims from the onslaught of two large ethnic communities. In general, there was in these parts of the country, “peaceful coexistence between the two communities until about the late 1980s when the Muslims began to be directly affected by the violence associated with the ethnic Conflict”19. The Muslims did not consider Tamil activism as a threat to their day-to-day life, culture and identity. They tolerated Tamil militancy to a great extent. It is so deplorable to see that these evicted people’s plight or patriotic life have not been included in the talks for ethnic issues, they were also an apart and parcel of the ethnic trouble. Both Tamil militants and the majority Buddhist tormented the community equally. Liberation movements attempted to absorb the Muslims of the North East towards the course of fight for Tamil Eelam by announcing

them as "Tamil speaking people", or Islamic Tamils. Muslims of the North East did not have a comprehensive political knowledge of their activities and involvements were limited only in voting for the Sinhala political parties to which they were committed. They did not realize the dangers being done to their traditional lands, economy, population density and their political activities. The Muslims were also not in a position to deem themselves as a section to join hands with the Tamils to fight for their nation against the Sinhala communalism. As a result, when the ethnic tension expedited by July 1983 riots, "The accelerated terrorist activities that have gone on unabated since then and the endless war in the North and east have snuffed out innocent Sri Lankan lives belonging to all communities in this country."

The political activism of Sri Lankan Tamils also interfered with the affairs of the Muslim population in the North and the East. In spite of the differences between the two communities, the gulf in terms of cultural ethos at least in the beginning did not sow the seeds of an antagonistic, rival attitude towards each other. "The lesson that has been tragically brought home to both Muslims and Tamils is that the two communities are inseparably linked and that a sound basis for co-existence." Though the Muslims tolerated Tamil militancy to a great extent, both the Tamil militants and the majority Buddhists tormented the community equally. In general, there was in these parts of the country, "peaceful coexistence between the two communities until about the late 1980s when the Muslims began to be directly

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affected by the violence associated with the ethnic conflict." The secessionist movements attempted to coopt the Muslims of the North East in the fight for Tamil Eelam by describing them as Tamil speaking people, or Islamic Tamils. For the Muslims of the North East their political involvement was limited to voting for the Sinhala political parties. They did not deem themselves to be in a position to join hands with the Tamils to fight against the Sinhala communalism.

However, the Muslims have been sympathetic towards the Tamil eelam movement. They offered refuge to the Tamils who were displaced by the onslaught of the security forces. They protected the Tamils, their belongings and even the fighters in times of danger. In spite of Muslim support for their cause, the Tamils unleashed terror against the Muslim farmers, looting property worth millions of rupees. "The breaking point of the Muslims came when the Tamil separatist tried, in the course of robbing a rich Muslim trader, to take his daughter as hostage in Akkaripathu, a predominant Muslim Town, 14 miles down South of Kalmunai, in the Ampara District. Angered by this, the Muslims registered protest by peaceful hartal in Akkaripathu, from 8 to 12 April 1985." Tamil separatists murdered Habeeb Mohamed, the Assistant Government Agent (AGA) of Muttur on 3 September 1987, which led to widespread protest demonstration by the Muslims throughout the Eastern Province. A.L.A. Majeed, a former MP and deputy Minister were killed in cold blood on 13 November 1987. In December 1987 Kattankudy, a village with a population of over 30,000 Muslims, came under the attack of armed fighters. Over 60 people were killed and more than

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22 Peiris, n.19, p. 356.
23 For details, see M.A. Nuhman, Understanding Sri Lankan Muslim Identity, ICES Ethnicity Course Series 4 (Colombo: ICES, 2002), p. 20.
200 injured. Property worth over Rs. 200 million was set on fire. In March 1988, the former chairman of Kattankudy town council was assassinated. In November 1989 the Tamil National Army massacred 41 Muslim policemen at the Karaithivu police station but did not touch the Tamil policemen. More than 200 Muslims were kidnapped and murdered by Tamil terrorists. On 14 May 1988, terrorists stormed into the mosque located at Kalmunai Street in Akkaraippattu and shot dead a Muslim policeman. The terrorists' grudge was that certain Muslims had tipped off the Army personnel about the whereabouts of members of the terrorist groups.

In the beginning, the Muslims considered the ethnic conflict to be a problem between the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils. But as the conflict progressed, Tamil-Muslim violence evolved on account of the disagreement on the issue of Tamil homeland and the status of Eastern Province Muslims. The Muslims in Sri Lanka find themselves sandwiched between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Their precarious position has been worsened by the subsequent militarization of the region. The Northern and Eastern Muslims have also been terrorized by the LTTE, killing many and forcing many to flee. In spite of the damage caused by the Tamil militants to the Muslims some Muslims continued in the armed groups.\(^{25}\) However, in early 1990, a decisive change in Tamil-Muslim relations occurred, particularly in the Eastern Province, when the Muslims resisted the Tamil militants' demand for money for the Eelam movement. After the LTTE declared the "Second Eelam war"\(^{26}\) they began a process of "ethnic cleansing" of Northern and Eastern Muslims. In late July 1990, more than 75 Muslims, most of whom were returning from the pilgrimage to Mecca were killed at

\(^{25}\) *The Island*, 22 March 2002.
\(^{26}\) On 6 June 1990.
Kurukal Madam by the LTTE. The same year in Jaffna, the LTTE gave Muslims a two-hour warning to evacuate the area and desert their homes, creating 90,000 Muslim refugees.\textsuperscript{27} This is a great blow to the Tamil-Muslim unity. Having lost the properties and pleasure, they are now living with sorrow and grief\textsuperscript{28}.

The tragic expulsion of the Muslims from the north in 1990 followed by the massacre of 123 Muslims who were praying in the mosque at Kattankudy, the slaughter of same number in Eravur are examples “LTTE cadre arrived in Eravur about 10.30 p.m and went about massacring Muslims until the early hours of the morning. They went through the Muslims areas of Suranttyankuda, Michnagar, Meerakernai, Saddam Hussein village and Punnakuda killing 121 persons. Among the worst reported incidents was that cutting of a pregnant lady’s stomach. The baby is said to have been pulled out and stabbed”.\textsuperscript{29} The Muslims have been evicted from the North especially Mannar, Jaffna and Vavuniya. In the East, they live in fear of Tamils, especially in areas like Batticaloa and Kalmunai.\textsuperscript{30} Both in the Eastern Province and Northern Province “The abduction and murder of Muslim public servants, village leaders, robbery and killing, removed every sympathy that the Muslims had for the Eelamists. In the Eastern Province, Muslim paddy landowners and Muslim tenant cultivators have been practically evicted from their paddy fields in areas like Unnichchai, Karadiyanaru, Pullumali, and Paduvankarai in the Batticaloa District.”\textsuperscript{31} “Surprise attacks on Muslim communities continued throughout the 1990s interspersed with


\textsuperscript{28} Ibid

\textsuperscript{29} UTHR,n.21, p. 11.


\textsuperscript{31} \textit{The Island}, 22 March 2002.
occasional large-scale massacres such as those of Alinchipotana in April 1992, Saindamaradu (Kalmunai) in September 1992, and Palliyagodella in October 1992.\textsuperscript{32} Though they have sacrificed their life and wealth, the general perception is that “It seems to say that today the whole of Sri Lanka—except, may be, for that small minority draws dividends, whether in power or in wealth, from conflict and bloodshed—-is united in a wish for peace”\textsuperscript{33}. Thus the Tamils and the Muslims increasingly became suspicious of each other during this period.

Successive massacres in Kattankudy and Eravur by the Tamil militants had shocked the Muslims and further increased their distrust on the Sri Lankan Tamils. “The LTTE stance over Muslims was very hypocritical. They are single-minded in their attempts to establish a separate Tamil homeland for themselves forgetting the assassinations committed by them in the 1990s. The manner in which the LTTE cadres were committing crimes against Muslims was the main driving force for the creation of a political party. “This is the situation where Muslim politics is concerned and the reason for the emergence of the SLMC to act as a counter force to narrow Tamil nationalism.”\textsuperscript{34} When the SLMC raised the slogan of Muslims’ security, the community in the North and East supported it on a large scale. The LTTE banned the SLMC’s political activities in the North and Eastern Province. It was said that the leader of the SLMC was on the LTTE hit list. Under this kind of environment the Muslims of the northern and eastern provinces began to question who would represent them in the government and ensure their security. Naturally, the Muslims felt insecure.

\textsuperscript{32} Peiris, n.19, p. 357.
\textsuperscript{34} Daily Mirror, 5 September 2002.
in the region. Therefore, When the SLMC raised the slogan of Muslims’ security, the community in the northern-eastern province supported it in large scale.

**Hartals and Protests**

Sequence of terrors unleashed against the Muslims of the East after 1985 troubles, made them discern for being Muslims, they were being subjected to such attacks. No other reasons were found for the killing of innocent Muslims who used to go for firewood to jungles, to look after cattle, for fishing and even traveling people. They had to scare and fear that being Muslims at any moment they would be in the grip of terrorists.

Muslims of the East coast felt that Colombo-based Muslim leaders were only concerned about maintaining their political power and did not voice the Eastern Muslims' interest in Parliament. Muslims were looking for guarantees not from the security forces or from Muslim politicians, but from the LTTE.

In this situation, the SLMC came forward to effectively organize the Muslim disaffection on several occasions. The SLMC leaders gathered peacefully, and collecting volunteers to participate. The Muslim youth and college students joined the protestors and sometimes women, too. Even though the SLMC was from the Eastern Province, when the ethnic conflict made the Eastern Muslims most vulnerable in the 1990s, Muslim traders in parts of Colombo for the first time closed their shops in

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35 Hennayake, n.13, p.191.
36 UTHR, n.21, p. 3.
response to a call from the SLMC to protest the killings of Muslims in the Eastern Province by the LTTE.37

In 1992 the SLMC organized a Black Friday38 to highlight the atrocities committed by the majority community on the Muslim community. Muslims throughout the island observed “hurtal” and picketing to mark Black Friday.

Issues of Representation

In the light of their geographical dispersion, the Muslims feared that the introduction of a proportional representation electoral system would mean further political marginalization of the Muslim community and prominent Muslims requested the President to ensure adequate representation of Muslim interest in the next Parliament according to population ratio.39 Under the proportional representation scheme the voters are compelled to choose their political representative whether or not they like the choice. It was no longer merely an issue of having Muslim members in representative bodies but rather the need for Northern and Eastern Muslim representation. Hitherto, the MPs who were Muslims were in effect representatives of the UNP or the SLFP in the Muslim community. Although there were twelve Muslims MPs and three Ministers, they failed to make an issue of Muslim grievances. None of them had, for example, raised any question when Muslims were being thrown out of lands occupied by them for 45 years, and even from jungle land cleared by them in Ampara district.40

40 The Weekend Express, 15 October 2000.
The compulsion of proportional representation made a political party even more necessary than earlier. The outcome of the proportional representation system seemed to be that the Muslims could opt for a political party of their own and hope to elect a Muslim candidate of their own choice from Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee.\textsuperscript{41} Since Muslim constituencies were absent, the constituencies being big and Muslim strength inadequate, there was no alternative to integrating their voting strength.

The problem of Muslim people in proportional representation starts here. Their unity has to be built from district level. To visualize that an efficient leadership funds, brainpower, discipline and tact have to the consolidated in the districts. The leaders and ranks of political parties should sensitize people to their problems, make principles according to need, and propagate that. In case of its absence, it would demonstrate the political strength of these people. Unity, cooperation and integration shall not bear automatically. It is possible only through thoughts and encouragement. In fact, those Ministers who favored proportional electorate would have thought that Muslims will unite under this system by the very virtue of their being Muslims. As they continued to live under the exploitation of Sinhala ethnicity, the Muslims of North East are aware of the need of a separate political institution to assure their existence and rights.

**PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SLMC**

A SLMC document outlines that the party is based on six broad objectives:

- To foster and safeguard the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.

\textsuperscript{41} Mohan, n.17, p. 63.
• To uphold and honour the principles of democracy and fundamental human rights of the people of Sri Lanka.

• To work toward the establishment and the preservation of the rule of law.

• To strive to recognize and respect the distinct linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious identities of the communities of Sri Lanka and to promote friendship, peace and harmony amongst them.

• To preserve and ensure the independence of the judiciary.

• To seek solutions to the socio-economic and ethnic problems of Sri Lanka based on the tenets of Islam, and preserve and promote the shari’ah laws and to encourage the members of the party and others to adopt the entire Code of Shari’ah laws in their private and community life.  

Before winning out the rights of a society, the intelligentsia of that community must get together and evolve a plan about the society, its needs, its aims, its political aspirations, etc and identify the problem areas. A group, which can voice for these, must be formed and power delegated to them. SLMC was determining to create the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Sri Lanka of challenges to identify of various communities of the country, also made the decision to restore the declining of cultural, spiritual, educational and economic values and the breakdown of law and order- believe that the present constitution of the SLMC would replace to achieve all these above said objectives. Moreover, it was aiming that to play more important role in contemporary politics of Sri Lanka humbly acknowledging obligation to people of Sri Lanka in general and the Muslim of Sri Lanka in particular.

It should not be denied that the existence of Muslim Congress is the shield for the Muslim community. Muslim Congress does have the assuring objective of preserving and protecting the art, culture, religious rights law fully of the Muslims who live as minorities elsewhere. Muslim Congress possesses the noble objective of moldings a strong Muslim community under a strong political party, which is been and earnest in boosting the people towards the Islamic code of life and in offering the means for that purpose. Muslim Congress, which has united one with another with the sole feeling and ideal, has the intention of establishing branches.

The SLMC also has 21 specific organizational principles and sub-objectives aimed at achieving its party objectives. Those principles and objectives range from the SLMC's commitment to adhere to the religious principles of Islam to empathizing with and maintaining good relations with other religious and ethnic communities of Sri Lanka. These are listed below.

1. Centring the precepts of the Quran and the leadership and the guidance of Prophet Mohamed, it is aimed to resolve nationally the political, educational, Cultural and socio-religious problems of Muslim minorities.

2. To get recognition as a political party of the Muslim community.

3. To introduce and propagate Islamic solutions for the national problems.

4. To constitute a 'Majlis' of learned and disciplined men, who could effectively think over the problems of the Muslim community and print and propagate these ideas among Muslims.

5. To inculcate a feeling of distinctness among Muslims and tie their objectives with the common objective of Muslim nations and international Muslim organizations and thereby facilitate the welfare of the community.
6. To sow mutual trust and faith among all communities enabling national integrity.

7. To create equal status for all religions and safeguard the status quo.

8. To legally assure that all people born and brought up in Sri Lanka shall be Sri Lankan citizens.

9. Giving equal status for Tamil language at par with Sinhala.

10. To safeguard the traditional settlement areas of Muslims.

11. To assure that North and East Provinces are traditional settlement sites of Muslim and Tamil people and the government lands to be distributed accordingly.

12. While constitutionally guaranteeing the fundamental rights of the people, safeguarding those rights through the legal system.

13. While guaranteeing the rule of law, firmly establishing the sovereignty and independence of the judiciary.

14. To patronize the religious culture and tradition of Muslims of Sri Lanka.

15. To cultivate inspirationally the talents of Muslim children and youth in the field of reading and writing. Also training them in leadership qualities.

16. To establish a daily newspaper for Muslims.

17. To build a cultural library for Muslims.

18. To establish a Muslim publishing institution and thereby publishing books of social, spiritual and cultural books.

19. To organize Muslim labour under Islamic principles and voice their problems. To effectively involve and work in the problem between employers and employees or between labour itself or between the entrepreneurs themselves or between the government and labour or between the government and entrepreneurs.

20. While cooperating in the resolution of the ethnic conflict, ensuring that the distinctness and future of the Muslim community is not violated.
21. While attaining the political integrity of Eastern Muslims winning the due share of Muslims when distribution of power takes place.\textsuperscript{43}

Since the formation of SLMC, a clear point is made to the Muslims of Sri Lanka that SLMC will not create any political desires and it is not a party to seize power in the Government. In the initial period of its formation, it had cleared the suspicion of the Muslim society who didn't know about the objectives of SLMC. The main propaganda of SLMC was not to fight for the rights of the Muslims but to unite the Muslims of the nation who otherwise were divided by their political ideologies. The aim of SLMC is not to have any political intention while participating in politics. SLMC also stressed the point that in Sri Lanka, if people harmoniously accommodate their views it is due only through the blessings of Allah and Islam. "The SLMC’s party ideology is not so much to Islamicize Sri Lankan society as it is to apply Islamic values to the society’s problems".\textsuperscript{44}

In the later period SLMC started affirming the rights of the Muslims, the needs of requirements, the need to develop individuality and the importance of implementing and introducing Islamic solutions to the political problems. It has also started discussing the values of fostering peace and tranquility among all communities and bring into practice equality, fraternity and the like characters to improve humanity. Therefore, it has started to utilize Islam for the election propaganda. "You may think whether making use of religion for political purpose is right & hitherto it was done through election manifestoes and party principles. This formed a wonderful custom.

\textsuperscript{43} Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, (Colombo: Phair Printers, 1986) (Pamphlet).
But in the last election.... Some parties... appealed with the use of religion and faith".45

On the basis of the formation of SLMC, some parties were also formed on religious ideologies specially Buddhists. SLMC also stressed the point that to live peacefully all the parties based on religion should co-exist. SLMC identifies itself with only religion but not with language as other political parties do. "The SLMC has since its inception claimed that it was a party pledged to follow the Quran and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet)"46. Therefore, the party continues the ideology with guidelines based on the Quran and the tradition of the holy Prophet. As the other communities are independently functioning, Muslims are inevitably required to establish their identity among other communities.

The SLMC promised Muslims that it would create the means for improving their living standard if they followed its agenda of fighting for the rights of the Muslim community.47 The party also made efforts to establish an interest-free economic system, to introduce Islam as a compulsory subject in education and for zakat. The party also stressed the right to employment and basic rights and the need to establish special facilities for the elderly and the orphans. The SLMC identified itself with only religion but not with any language. The party assured protection of all the people with equal status and protection of places of worship of all religions. It would also work to eliminate political victimization and ensure the dignity of women.

47 Knoerzer, n.44, p. 159.
Party Structure and Hierarchy

The SLMC operates with a said constitution and code of conduct. Until 26th April 1998 a constitution was not thought as necessary for the party. But later, it was decided to have an exclusive constitution, which sharply propounded its ideals, its hierarchy and exclusive perquisites such as the symbol, emblem and flag. The adoption of constitution marks symbolically a unique growth, which is a significant milestone for the party. As stated earlier, to operate between two major ethnic groups, which are politically well organized and sound and diplomacy is required. In the initial phase itself SLMC authored for itself a constitution, which is not adopted. But since 1988, it was greatly successful in bargaining politics, which will be elaborated in the next chapter and won for itself a unique and un- ignorable place. When this process is over, it symbolically intended to celebrate its victory through adoption of constitution like any sovereign body.

Its symbol is a tree. As its emblem it has an uncrossed crescent with a five-cornered star. The party flag has the symbol of the party in the centre and the words “La-ilaha-illallah Muhammadur-Rasoolullah” in Arabic on top. “Bismillaah hir-Rahmanir Raheem” is the party anthem. The party secretariat is called “Dharussalaam”, situated in Colombo.

Persons above the age of 15 (both male and female) agreeing to abide by the regulations of the party are eligible to can become members. The village organizer on receipt of the membership application issues a membership card. The annual

48 For more details see, The Constitution of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, Chapter 1, Article 1.1, n.d
49 “Allah is the One and Mohammed is his messenger.”
50 “In the name of Allah the Most beneficient the most merciful.”
subscription is Rs. 20. The life members pay Rs. 5,000. The party politbureau is the ultimate authority to formulate rules and regulations.

When the constitution of Sri Lanka accords voting rights only to citizens who are above the age of 18, SLMC provides membership to persons above 15 years of age. This enables it to have even students of seniors schools among its ranks. Moreover, the term 'person' is a more general term that includes females also. The constitutional history of Sri Lanka had not accorded a justifiable place for women. SLMC, carefully has kept itself away from such a charge by stating person’s. The Rs 20 membership is to expand the party base wherein even inactive members can be included easily. The Rs. 5000 fee for life membership is a mechanism to filter the permanent members. Because most of the offices are rotated among them.⁵¹

The party hierarchy is as follows:

- Leader
- Chairman
- Senior Deputy Leader
- first Deputy Leader
- second Deputy Leader
- General Secretary
- National Organizer
- General Treasurer
- National Propaganda Secretary
- National Coordinating Secretary
- Deputy General Secretary
- Deputy National Organizer
- Deputy Chairman
- Deputy Treasurer
- Deputy National Propaganda Secretary
- Politbureau Members
- Working Committee Secretary
- Directors
- Representative of Active Affiliated Bodies
- District Organizers
- Working Committee Members
- Delegates
- Life Members
- Ordinary members

The national conference of the party is held every year within four months of holding the annual delegates' conference. The leader makes the keynote address elaborating

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52 For details, see *The Constitution of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress*, Chapter 111, Article 3.1(b) (n.d).
on policy issues and programmes of the future. It is also an occasion to honour members who rendered distinguished service to the party. A similar convention is held every two years at district level. Members are given an opportunity to express their views in these district conventions. The first five national conventions were held in the East. But when the SLMC wanted to portray itself as the sole representative of the Muslims at the national level it shifted its venue to Colombo for the sixth convention.

The leader, the organizer and the general treasurer hold title in trust for the party. The party funds are to be used according to the resolutions of the politbureau.

The High Command decides upon issues of urgent nature. Most of its members are members of the politbureau and are elected by it. The Deputy General Secretary, Deputy National Organizer, Deputy Chairman, etc. are also nominated by the politbureau. Members of the High Command are also ex-officio members of party subcommittees. They can also recommend a member of the subcommittee to become a member of the politbureau. The High Command also recommends members of the working committee.\(^{53}\)

The SLMC has a Majlis-e-Shoora, comprising all past members of the politbureau who continue to be active members of the party. Its decisions bind the politbureau and it can summon the latter any time. The chief function of the Majlis is to derive consensus if a deadlock arises in the politbureau decisions. This mechanism is a device

to utilize the political expertise of seniors and elders on one hand and to honour the sincerity of service of previous leaders of the politbureau. 54

The politbureau is the heart of the party. It is the representative body of the working committee. It elects the members of the High command and is answerable to the Majlis. It is the interpreter and enforcer of the party constitution. It can delegate its power to members of the High Command. It is constituted by the leader, the chairman, the senior deputy leader, the two deputy leaders, the general secretary, the national organizer, the general treasurer, the national propaganda secretary, the national coordinating secretary, the deputy general secretary, the deputy national organizer, the deputy chairman and the representatives of affiliated bodies that are active in the opinion of the High Command. In all, it has twenty-three members. It is binding on the party to include the members of Parliament representing the party, the secretary of working committee, the secretary of the Majlis-e-shoora, one member each from affiliated bodies and three nominated members of the ulema. The politbureau meets at least once a month. Failure to attend three consecutive meetings without a valid reason disqualifies a member but for a valid reason he could be readmitted on appeal.

The politbureau appoints all office holders and can expel members of the party as a result of disciplinary action. It can constitute, dissolve or organize any subcommittee or subordinate organization or allied body of the party and scrutinize their activities. The politbureau nominates members of its subsidiary committee from among itself, from the working committee or from the party. It also appoints the presiding officer of

54 Ibid.
the committee. The politbureau decides upon the nomination of candidates for
election.

The party Working Committee is composed of all members of the High Command, all
members of the Majlis-e-Shoora, all members of the People’s Representative
Committee, all village organizers, all Village propaganda secretaries, all
representatives of the active affiliated bodies of the party and such others nominated
by the High Command. While making recommendation the High Command would
take into view whether all districts and Provinces are adequately represented. The
committee has to meet at least once in three months. A member who fails to attend
two consecutive meetings without valid reason is deemed to have vacated his
membership. The chairman of the party presides over the meetings. The Working
Committee elects all members of the politbureau except members of the High
Command. It formulates the guidelines of the party. The leader of the party is vested
with the power of appointing directors who shall hold office at his pleasure. This
suggests the extraordinary power the party leader has over the party office-bearers and
other minor ranks.55

The People’s Representative Committee in the SLMC consists of elected and
nominated or appointed members of Parliament, Provincial Council, municipal
council, urban council, Pradeshya Sabhas and all other elected bodies. Its members
are subject to strict discipline. The violation of any clause in the constitution or the
code of conduct results in summary dismissal of the member. Members of this
committee regularly mingle with other party members and the public and are liable to

55 Ibid

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be tempted to defect or indulge in other anti-party activities. The leader of the party himself chairs the committee, and in his absence the senior most member. The leader nominates the secretary of the committee.

The elected members of every party organ are to be organized into mandatory bodies. Every mandatory body will discuss within itself before the respective party organ meets. The head of the mandatory body is called group leader and is appointed by the leader of the party. The party leader has the right to be consulted by all the groups. Similarly, the group leader enjoys such a right within the group. Every group is collectively responsible for its conduct to the party.56

The Delegates Conference of the party is composed of all members of the Majlis-e-Shoora, all members of the village working committee, all People’s Representative Committee members, all others who are admitted for special reasons on the recommendations made by the respective village organizations and such members from active overseas branches decided by the politbureau of the party. The politbureau decides upon the maximum number of delegates. The delegates conference meets once a year. The interval between two conferences shall not be more than 14 months. The business of the conference includes address by the leader, report of the general Secretary and the general treasurer. The leader through this mechanism comes in touch with grassroots leaders. Similarly, the power of the national organizer comes into effective play while admitting delegates for special

56 Ibid
reasons on the recommendation of the respective village organizers. The delegates conference can also be summoned for special purposes.\footnote{57}

The national organizer in consultation with the leader of the party appoints the district organizer, deputy district organizer, secretary and members of the district central committee. The national organizer summons all the village central committees of a Pradeshya Sabha division under the headship of either a village organizer or such person he deems fit. In appointing him, the national organizer consults the leader of the party. That body becomes the central Pradeshya Sabha Committee. Decisions are taken in these bodies on the basis of consensus.\footnote{58}

The basic organ of the party is at the village level. The village central committee is under the leadership of the village organizer who is appointed by the national organizer in consultation with the party leader. The politbureau appoints the propaganda secretary of the village in consultation with the national organizer and all other members on its own. The village propaganda secretary in turn appoints the branch propaganda secretary. The village central committee is an advisory body assisting the village organizer on the basis of consensus building. The committee's functions include setting up of committees dealing with culture, education, health, agriculture, fishing, etc. The village working committee is composed of the village organizer, village propaganda secretary, all presidents, secretaries, treasurers, propaganda secretaries and one more member from each branch of the village. The

\footnote{57}{Ibid} \footnote{58}{Ibid}
village working committee meets at least once in three months and advises the village organizer on various issues.

The village organizer conducts the election of branch president, secretary, treasurer and other office-bearers. The branch in consultation with the village organizer determines the strength of its office-bearers. The village organizer also conducts the annual public meeting to be held in every Grama Seva Niladhari division.59

The affiliated organizations of the party includes the Ulema Congress, the Undergraduate Congress, the Youth Congress, the Ladies’ Congress, the Teachers’ Congress, the Farmers’ Congress, the Liberation Workers’ Congress, the Post Workers’ Congress, the Traders’ Congress, the Professional Congress and the National Unity Congress. The village organizer is the ex-officio head of all affiliated bodies of the party within a village. It is binding on an affiliated body member to be a member of the branch as well.60

**LEADERSHIP AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SLMC**

This section assesses whether leadership qualities of the SLMC leadership were connected with the rise and fall of the party.

M.H.M. Ashraff, the founding leader of the SLMC, stressed the need to ensure the basic rights of Muslims and their cultural rights. To translate his goals into reality he invoked Islamic ideology to establish unity among the Muslims of Sri Lanka.

59 Ibid
60 Ibid

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Ashraff was a grandson of a notable political leader from the East, M.M.S. Kariappar, and was a lawyer by profession. Academically, Ashraff was an average student. He strongly believed in the importance of the knowledge of the English language for the progress of his community. While studying Law at Colombo, he was forcefully advocating the need for a separate political party for Muslims to assert their political rights. Some also accused him of inciting Tamil-Muslim clashes.

With impressive oratorical skills and being a Tamil poet, he espoused the political aspirations of the Eastern Muslims in relation to education, security, regional autonomy, and equal recognition of their religious identity on par with the Tamils. But the Muslims, accustomed to voting with the Sinhala-majority national parties, ignored his advocacy. Asharff was widely opposed by both Tamils and Muslims, and was finally forced to flee his home in Kalmunai (Ampara district) as it was burnt to the ground.

Ashraff clearly had leadership qualities and he was accorded the status of speaker in the Muslim Liberation Front. He attempted to provide international standard to the Southeastern University and wanted to change its name to “Scientific and Technological University”. His Rehabilitation Reconstruction Ministry launched several schemes for higher education.

In the constitution of SLMC, it was strongly worded that if any other members express an opinion on behalf of the party it shall be deemed misconduct. The leader

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62 Knoerzer, n.44, p. 142.
can take disciplinary action upon any member under extraordinary condition and has to communicate his action to polit bureau. In the phase of inception, the leadership was characterized as one based on collectivity.

Ashraff was accused to have operated outside the definition of power given to him and being self-centric and undemocratic in deciding over issues. The elimination of Sheikh Issadeen is a citable example similarly; his dictator like behavior was witnessed while carding out founder members and parliamentarians such as S.S.M. Aboobakar, M.M. Suhair, I.M. Ilyas etc. Ashraff was no exemption to the political process based on power struggle.

He was subjected to criticism throughout his life. Criticism also rejuvenates and reshapes the political action of a leader. Criticism were directed to make him informed of the trend and requiring him to be more honest files own personality, his party, his place of domicile all earned animistic critics.

Permanence in politics and stability of party in the long run to a level is required such behavior. But still, the extraordinary veto power and cultic formation around leadership where common in SLMC that came under serious criticism. In spite of there being several successive leaders in the party hierarchy, Ashraff did not provide for a constant mobility among them. He did not single out his successor. At times he remarked a few only to idealize them. This mistake had taken severe toll from SLMC. Those who were guided by him and those who willingly followed him were men of inscrutable character. This resulted in division of party into two extreme poles.
While being a charismatic leader, Ashraff also had dictatorial tendencies. The constitution of the party that he founded gave him enormous powers. It did not allow divergence of opinion from that of the leader, construing it misconduct subject to disciplinary action. Power struggle was visible in the party under Ashraff's leadership. He did not think of a possible successor to himself and created divisions in the party, one camp backing him fully and the other opposing his spiritedly. When he died, there was schism in the party with Hakeem leading one group and Mrs. Ferial Ashraff the other. Both were designated as co-leaders but the court order was in favour of Hakeem.

Conclusion

During the post-independence era, every community in Sri Lanka other than the Muslims identified itself with its own political party. The Muslims were the only community that had no one to speak for it. There was desire for separate representation among Muslims since the second half of the nineteenth century. They had the feeling that the Muslim politicians by entangling themselves in the majority political parties were pawning the rights and self-respect of the community. With the rise of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the Muslims of Sri Lanka for the first time in their history became active participants in the politics of the country.\(^6\)

The notable changes of Muslim polity after the emergence of the SLMC are:

- emergence as an independent political leadership for Muslims
- shifting of political power from Colombo and/or South to East of Muslim populated rural areas in Sri Lanka

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\(^6\) The Island, 22 March 2002.
being the prime agent for a dramatic alteration in the balance of political forces within Muslim politics as well as the national political stream.

The early Muslim leaders who belonged to the national parties had considerable rank and file following among Muslims. Breaking such a conventional chain of leadership and launching a new party was unimaginable at one point of time in Sri Lankan politics.

The party also tried to inculcate a feeling of distinctness among Muslims and tie their cause with that of the pan-Islamic one. The SLMC intends to patronize the religious culture and tradition of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. As to language, it demands equal statues for Tamil language. It wants to assurances about the Northern and Eastern Provinces being traditional settlement habitats of Muslim and Tamil people and the Government lands to be distributed accordingly.