CHAPTER - V
PROGRAMME AND GROWTH OF THE SLMC

INTRODUCTION

"The SLMC was created as a political vehicle to voice the agenda of a transformed community. The movement was a combination of increased socio-economic mobility, threatened personal and ethnic security and the rise in an international campaign to purify and protect the Muslim identity." The SLMC has played an impressive role in articulating the grievances of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and asserting the identity of Muslims. It has constructed the way for protecting the Muslim interest in and given the support for the national politics.

This chapter describes the ideological base on which the SLMC was formed and fortified. It concludes with a note on how the formation of the SLMC had paved the way for the expression of grievances of the Muslims of Sri Lanka through party politics. In the second part of the chapter, the achievements of the party in the political, economic and developmental fields are assessed. The Muslim Congress had to grow amidst strong opposition from the entrenched interests of the major national parties, which felt threatened by the rise of another minority leadership.

THE PROCESS OF FORMATION

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was registered as a political party in 1987. Its founder leader was M.H.M. Ashraff. In 1989, the party contested in the Provincial Council elections and won 17 seats. The party also won four seats in the national election. The reasons behind this success make an interesting study.

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The Muslim Congress, which had been looking into the interests of the Muslims, declared itself as a political party with the intention of serving and functioning as a national party in the Republic of Sri Lanka, in order to achieve its fundamental objective of giving a political voice to the Muslims of Sri Lanka. For recognition as a political party an organization had to deposit Rs. 400,000 in its account in the bank and had to have a minimum of 4,000 members. To meet the first requirement, the party had to take a loan. Its enrolled membership was 8,000. On 11 February 1988 the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress was recognized as a political party by the Election Commissioner.

The general objectives of the party were centred on the question of Islamic objectives of nation building, at the same time it was also emphasizing the overall improvement of the Muslim community. Among the SLMC's declared objectives was safeguarding the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and principles of democracy, rule of law, independence of the judiciary, religious equality and mutual trust. The party's strong faith in non-violence and universal peace, despite the war-prone situation in Sri Lanka, was thus made crystal clear. The party's faith in democracy has been repeatedly established by its enthusiastic participation in bargaining politics in various elections.

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3 Interview with Rauff Hakeem, leader of the SLMC, during fieldwork in Kandy, March 2005.
Strategies Used to Strengthening the Party

From the outset, the SLMC attempted to highlight the adverse impact on the Muslim community for not having their own political party. The emergence of the SLMC was initially perceived as an attempt by the Muslims to assert their identity. This perception has now changed, with the SLMC projecting itself as a vibrant and meaningful political force focusing attention on macro-level national issues as opposed to a parochial agenda. It is also widely acknowledged that the SLMC is an important player in the search for a lasting solution to the country’s ethnic problem.

The SLMC made it clear from the beginning that it wanted to politicize the community rather than offering an attractive welfare package. The party’s initial mass base was among uneducated persons and farmers. The SLMC sought to expand its base among this section of people by breaking the hold of the conventional Muslim leadership on them. Considerable propaganda was made of the evidence of these leaders exploiting the gullible Muslim populace. The conventional leadership did not seek to unify the mass of Muslims into a movement, being ignorant of their collective power as voters.

Moving cautiously, the leadership of the SLMC did not plunge into electoral politics at first. It opted to go for constructive work for which it utilizing religion as a major vehicle along which it also took up issues pertaining to the region, economy, culture and society. After establishing itself strongly among the uneducated persons and farmers of the East, it gradually expanded among the people of the South, the Ulema, youth, students, labourers, teachers and women.
The national conferences of the SLMC at first used to be held in the East. Making a tactical move for wider recognition, the party held its national conference in 1996 at Pasha Villa in Colombo. The objective in changing the venue of the SLMC’s annual national conference to Colombo was to attract the southern Muslim community. The party head office, named ‘Dharusallam’, was also located in Colombo. From this office the party mouthpiece *Muslim Congress* was published and circulated throughout the nation. This journal highlighted the constructive work carried out by the SLMC while discussing the specific concerns of its audience. In course of time, the party leadership came to realize the importance of Ampara district as the source of Muslim strength and power.

**Strengthening the Party through Electoral propaganda**

The SLMC issued an election manifesto for the general elections of 1989 but not for the general election of 1994 as the party was in disarray at the time. The manifesto of 1989 was used as an effective instrument to convey the party’s firm belief in the democratic process. The SLMC manifestos thereafter during several elections cover a common ground on issues such as the system of governance in the North East, constitutional reforms, foreign policy, social welfare, economy, education, health, mass media and women. There is close and consistent correspondence between the party manifesto and its principles enunciated in its constitution.

Mobilizing the people through Islamic ideals and symbols only in the initial phase of inception, the SLMC played down the religious aspect while contesting elections since it was fighting the elections as part of a coalition. Hence, there was a marked

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4 Dharusallam, Ceremonial opening on 23 October 1998.
difference between the SLMC’s printed manifesto\textsuperscript{4} and what it propagated among the masses. At the local level, the local problems and aspirations were addressed orally, such as the lack of funds for building marriage hall, Ameena girls high school and other land related issues. In Kandy, the failure of building men’s college was brought into focus. At the local level, the party also voiced its support to the demand for four months and ten days leave with pay for Muslim women during the adoption of Idaat.

The candidates and their workers conducted several door-to-door and street campaigns. They met voters face to face, sometimes individually but mostly in small corner meetings. Sometimes the local members would conduct the candidate round the locality in a procession. Demonstrations and meetings were organized through the province to show solidarity with the leadership.

The elaborations made on the poll promises invoking Islamic ideology by the SLMC during the election period and other periods of contingency greatly politicized the Muslim community. Therefore, there is an observable difference between the early elections and later elections in terms of the Muslims’ political awareness. The Muslim community has been politicized to the extent of criticizing the national leaders on various issues.

**Religio-Cultural Strengthening**

The SLMC was seen as a party based on the religious-cultural beliefs and practices of Muslims. Islam being a guiding religion could be effectively used for resolving various problems. It is the only weapon for the Islamic community to secure its

\textsuperscript{4} See the SLMC’s Election Propaganda manifesto, 1989.
independence and distinctiveness. While the two other communities assert their identity through language, the SLMC took religion as its identity factor and to a certain extent succeeded. But the emphasis on the religious identity also introduced contradictions. A.H.M. Fowzie said, “The SLMC revels in misusing religion for its own ends.” Ameer Ali commented, “The appearance of the SLMC on the political horizon exposed for the first time that the so-called unity of the Muslims under the religious banner is only a superficial image and beneath that banner there are real issues which encourage centrifugalism.”

Therefore, the religious symbols and ideas were effectively used to mobilize people on the one hand and on the other hand political problems were approached with a certain degree of finesse. To identify itself as the leader of the Muslim community the SLMC utilized the name of religion while engaged in the politics of a national party.

The SLMC also stressed the point that to live peacefully all the parties based on religion should co-exist. The 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)”

Elaborating on the SLMC’s emphasis on Islam Ashraff stated in Parliament.

Sir, we believe that Islam is a complete way of life, Islam should not be confined to the four walls of a mosque. As Muslims, it is our belief, Sir, that we must guide the ignorant. The difference of Islam, with respect to other religions, is that Islam shows to us how an orderly and a disciplined society can be built up, in fact, that is one of the major problems that we are facing today.

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Underlining the importance of Islam in their political approach, the leaders of the SLMC began their speeches invoking Allah and the Quran. The speeches are often marked by Islamic quotations such as “Laelaha Illallah Muhammadur Rasulallah (Allah is the One and Mohammed is his messenger). To mobilize Muslims, the SLMC stated,

Individual Muslim votes so far had no influence. In the future also, they [Muslims] are not going to alter the basic character. Therefore, we should at least now think about the utility of collective votes. If we continue with this small-scale business, we will be lost. On the other hand if we could bring the key players into our vote bank influence, with the blessing of Allah we may be able to secure our present and future rights.

The SLMC approached the Ulema only after considerably expanding its political base among the ordinary people. Since there was no special role for the Ulema in the inception of the party, there was no risk of its total Islamization. In the later phase, however, mosques played a vital role. For example, Kattankudy, a major Muslim settlement in the East, formed the ‘Federation of Mosque Associations’ in which several mosque committees joined to face threats from the Tamil groups. Similar attempts were made in Sammanthurai, Mutur, Kinniya, Kalmunai, Erukkalampiddy and a number other Muslim concentration in the North-East. These mosque federations encouraged the growth of the SLMC during 1987-1988.

Among the SLMC’s initiatives to promote the Islamic way of life is establishing an Islamic treasury ‘Baithal Maal’, basing each mosque as a pillar of Islam, ‘Zakat’ and

10 Virakesari, 10.3.1993.
‘Sadaqa’¹³ to help the poor to live dignified lives, finding employment for them in the private sector, providing food, shelter, medical facilities, education and so on. Encouraging the Muslims to learn Arabic is also part of the programme. The SLMC has also made it a point to fight against racial, ethnic or religious discrimination, which characterizes the politics of Sri Lanka. For the SLMC, in the beginning the appeal to Islamic principles became its distinctive trademark for popular appeal. Associations such as the Organization of Islamic Conference, constituted by 56 Islamic nations, advocate the welfare of the Muslim people living throughout the world. But the problem of the Muslims of Sri Lanka had not effectively reached these organizations. Therefore, the SLMC preferred to sensitize the global community through tabling its problem in Muslim associations first and through them to reach the United Nations next.

SLMC party ranks are required to conform to the Sharia tenets. religious symbols such as the uncrossed crescent with five cornered star appearing in the emblem and the flag of the party were effectively used to touch the religious sentiment of the people, also, the organization was conceived to have principles of Islamic polity that what is based on deciding upon consensus. An association of elders and seniors was named Majlis-E-Shoora, which forms rules and regulations for the whole party including the polit bureau. On one occasion the party pressed Parliament to give certain special privileges to Muslim staff. Ashraff demanded, "Sir, I rose and brought to your notice that on Fridays arrangements have to be made to make it convenient for

¹³ The Quran decrees the payment of an alms tax, call Zakaat, which is to be redistributed to support the poor, orphans, and widows. Most commonly today, the payment of the Zakat, although mandatory in the Islamic faith, is left to the individual and the community. Sadaqa is charity.
Muslim Members of Parliament and the Muslim staff of the Parliament to attend Jum’ah prayers.”\(^{14}\)

**Emphasizing identity**

The SLMC leadership learnt through experience how to strengthen the party. The ethno-political environment of the country facilitated its assertion of identity.

In Sri Lanka, the Muslims are numerically significant in the Eastern and the Northern Provinces. Their concentration is higher in the Eastern province. The leadership of the SLMC, highlighting this point, states, “the Muslim element of the Eastern Province is very important not only to the Muslims of the Eastern Province but to all the Muslims of this country because it is only in the Eastern Province that you find that 33 per cent population are Muslims. We have a significant strength—a significant political strength—in the affairs of the Eastern Province.”\(^{15}\)

There was a felt need for the Muslims of Sri Lanka to secure their position and identity as minorities. Therefore, there was a tendency to Arabize the local Islamic tradition. In the perception of the SLMC the culture of the Tamils and Sinhalese is very similar. In its view, the Tamil language is not the cultural heritage of the Muslims. They adopted the language only for the purpose of trade and commerce, which resulted in wiping out the original language.\(^{16}\)


\(^{15}\) M.H.M. Ashraff, Parliamentary Debate, 9 September 1989, pp. 1711-12.

\(^{16}\) Interview with Rauff Hakeem, leader of the SLMC, during fieldwork in Kandy, March 2005
On the language issue the party stance was clear from the beginning. In a parliamentary debate Ashraff remarked about “What late Dr. Colvin R. de Silva said when the Official Language Act was debated in 1956. He said, if you have two languages for this country you will have one nation. If you have only one language then there will be two nations.”17

Politically too, they differ vastly. In the late 1980s, the emergence of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) especially for the Muslim in the Eastern Province reflected the assertion of their different identity. At the same time, the Muslim community those who in the south and Colombo are also responsible for the growth of the party, that proves the parliament statement of Ashraff, “We are not compelling anyone who does not accept the policies of our party to join our party. It is left to him. But as much as we are not compelling anyone, no one can stop the Muslim community from accepting the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress as its sole spokesman in the near future.”18

As regards the Muslims’ identity based on their religion the state organs themselves acknowledged it. The Delimitation Commission in its report of 1947 stated, “We are however inclined to the view that the religious tie is stronger than the racial tie and that it is proper in assessing the Muslims’ strength to include Indian Moors under the category of Muslims, and on this basis the Muslim strength is 31.8 per cent...”19 Since the ruling dispensation in the country preferred to identify the minority communities either with their religion or language, when an overarching leadership

17 M.H.M. Ashraff, Parliamentary Debate, 10 April 1989, p. 1434.
asserted the Muslim identity, many Muslims subsumed themselves under this common identity.

Safeguarding the Community from Ethnic Conflict

In the early phase of the ethnic conflict, there was peaceful coexistence between the Tamil and Muslim communities until about the late 1980s, when the Muslims began to be directly affected by the violence associated with the ethnic conflict. 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 for an antagonistic, rival attitude towards each other. The Muslims deplored the fact that these evicted people’s plight and the Muslims’ place in the nation’s life were not included in the talks on ethnic issues. The Muslims did not consider Tamil activism as a threat to their day-to-day life, culture and identity but the political activism of the Tamils interfered with the lives of the Muslim population in the North and the East in the later phase.

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” However, the Muslims had been sympathetic towards the struggle of the Liberation movements. They offered refuge to the Tamils who were displaced of

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onslaught of security forces. They have safeguarded the Tamils, their belongings and even the fighters at the time of dangers. After 1983, there was very great danger of Muslims being engulfed into the struggle as ‘Tamil speaking people’ rather than as Muslims.

This gradually would have undermined the identity of Muslims as the third significant community in the nation, not to speak of its position as a minority. In early 1990, a decisive change in Tamil-Muslim relations occurred, particularly in the Eastern Province, when the Tamil militants’ demand for money for the Eelam movement was resisted by the Muslim society. When the LTTE declared the “Second Eelam war,” the Muslim community was even more frustrated, making the rupture with the Tamils permanent.

The SLMC was formed at this juncture to protect the rights of the Muslims in general and of Eastern Muslims in particular. As a party exclusively devoted to securing Muslim interests, the SLMC was better placed to focus on its agenda than the national ethnic parties.

**Securing Community Rights**

It has been emphatically alleged that the southern Muslim political leaders had traditionally represented only the interest of the business class. The Muslims in the East and the North, being largely farmers and fishermen, were neglected. These Muslim leaders made promises to the voters which they failed to keep. There was thus a good opening for a more forward-looking and sincere leadership among the

\[23\] On 6 June 1990.
Muslims of nation. At the right moment, the SLMC filled the political vacuum prevailing among the Muslim community to become a political force accepted by the people. The leader of the SLMC once expressed with a slogan as “None but we must get our rights ourselves” and was able to prove it that it is the SLMC that is dreamed political force for Muslims to win their due rights.

Experience of the political events that took place after 1956 told the SLMC that the minority communities could not be accommodated within a unitary State. In a multi-ethnic state every ethnic group concerned itself only with its own welfare even at the cost of another ethnic group. In a speech in Parliament Ashraff stated,

Communal hatred, chauvinism and the absence of a broad-minded approach to national problems on the part of the major political parties and successive governments instead of bringing these communities together, kept on increasing the distance between these three islands. The bridge of religion has failed to connect the three islands; the bridge of language has failed to connect these three islands; the bridge of high learning too has failed to connect these islands.

The Muslim Congress therefore became the shield of the Muslim community. The declared objective of the Muslim Congress is preserving and protecting the art, culture, and religious rights lawfully of the Muslims who live as minorities in Sri Lanka. Towards this objective a strong Muslim community needs to be moulded under a strong political party, and the people encouraged towards the Islamic code of life in a suitable environment. Muslim social organizations can be formed with the mosques as the base. The mosques also become active agents for promoting Islamic laws and procedures in the life of the Muslim community.

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SLMC PROGRAMME FOR THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF MUSLIMS

The party aims to develop interest in education among the Muslim youth and children and train them in leadership qualities. Another of its objectives is to organize the labour force under Islamic principles for a harmonious relationship between the employers and employees. The party promises a better living standard for the Muslims if they follow its agenda in fighting for the rights of the Muslim community.\textsuperscript{26} As part of promoting Islamic culture it has made efforts to establish an interest-free economic system, to introduce Islam as a compulsory subject in education, to help the poor and to set up facilities for the elderly and the orphans. As part of its promotion work the party established a daily newspaper, a cultural library and a Muslim publishing institution.

Political Development

The political unification of people is a major achievement of the party, giving it national recognition and national character. Several elections have proved to the other national parties that the support of the SLMC is a must both to win elections and to form a government. Even where Muslims remained numerically few they were able to determine results.

Realizing the importance of the party as the second major partner in the coalition, the SLMC leadership entered into bargain for the welfare of the Muslim community.

\textsuperscript{26} Knoerzer, n.1, p. 159.
Acquiring the portfolio of the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, which aimed at alleviating the pathetic condition of the war-affected people of the North and the East, the SLMC assured improved housing, roads and infrastructure in the East.\textsuperscript{27} The SLMC also demanded adequate reservation for all the minorities, including Muslims, in high government posts.

Enlightening the community to cooperate with the minorities in order to form a national government, the SLMC attracted almost all the Muslims to the party, winning nine parliamentary seats in 2000, which made the Muslim community a determining force in the national politics once again. It was the peak of the SLMC's achievement that through the changed voter behaviour it was able to achieve the reduction of 12.5 cut-off points to 5 per cent.\textsuperscript{28}

The expansion of the SLMC among the people of various walks of life simultaneously gave it recognition as only mouthpiece of the Muslims. Bowing to the pressure of electoral politics and his party constituency's demand Ashraff gave up use of the veto power which marked the early years of the party's functioning. In the early phase, the veto was a necessity given the inexperience of the party, the ranks of the party being predominantly illiterates and susceptible to the machinations of the other political parties and interests which perceived the SLMC as a challenge.

Even in the later phase of electoral politics, it enshrined through it constitution only its predominant desire to work for the Muslim people. Hence, a gradual process of

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p. 156.
consolidating its hold over the politics of Sri Lanka with political base among Muslims could be observed. But to its unfortunate destiny, the demise of Mr. A.H.M. Ashraff, the leadership of the SLMC, obstructed the process after which there was neglect on the past of nationalist politicians like Chandrika Kumaratunga.

In the beginning, the SLMC sought to mobilize the masses against the background of the adverse effects of the ethnic conflict. Not wishing to antagonize the Tamils, the party in the beginning did not align with any nationalist party in the North East when fighting the election. After the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) the animosity between the UNP and the LTTE abated. At the same time, the SLFP was humiliating the SLMC by not implementing the agreed demands. Hence, the SLMC considered joining the UNP in the Presidential elections, putting forth its primary demand for joining the coalition for lowering the of cut-off points in the electoral system, which gave equal advantage to all minorities. This step spared the SLMC from the wrath of Tamil armed groups. However, the severe manslaughter in 1990 proved that these groups would never be satisfied while democratically participating in politics.

The consequences of these political achievements, directed every majority party to be conscious of the trend introduced by the SLMC. Therefore, no one dared to ignore the strength of Muslims in the politics in Sri Lanka.

**Early Political Victories of the SLMC**

In 1987, when parliamentary elections were declared in the East, the SLMC leadership decided to join the electoral fray. The Tamil armed groups, trying to
acquire control over the region of North and East, did not want the elections to be held and spread an atmosphere of instability through terror. The SLMC leadership tried to make the armed groups understand that it was vital for the SLMC to participate in the election, failing which its future political prospects would be diminished, but the armed groups would not listen.\footnote{M.L.A Cader, “Ashraff Enum Arasiyal Viveki: Avar thalaimaithuwam patiya or aivu” (Peradeniya: Sri Lanka Political Society, 2002), p. 85.} In spite of considerable misgivings within the party the leadership preferred a tough stand and entered the electoral arena with others. But due to the signing of Indo-Sri Lankan Accord the elections were postponed and provincial elections were scheduled for 1988. The SLMC won 29 seats in the 1988 Provincial Council elections held throughout the island, symbolizing the party’s achievements in unifying the scattered Muslim community in a short span of time. The party’s victory was more marked in the North and the East than in the other parts.

The results of the 1988 Presidential elections made it clear that any national party ambitious of having its candidate as President had to coopt the SLMC, thus bringing the SLMC into the limelight of national politics. In 1989, the SLMC members entered Parliament as part of the opposition with four members. In 1994, with its bargaining power the SLMC was able to get a cabinet berth. Through the ministry, Ashraff as the leader of the SLMC did convincing work that elevated him to the position of an indisputable leader of the Muslims though not everyone in the other communities saw matters in that light.\footnote{9th Parliament of Sri Lanka (Colombo: The Associated News Papers of Ceylon Ltd, n.d.), pp 132-35; W.G. Goonerathne and R.S. Karunaratne (eds.) Tenth Parliament of Sri Lanka (Colombo: The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd, 1996), pp. 361-429.}
The victories during the general elections of 1989, 1994 and 2000 and the local bodies election of 1989 consistently increased the mass support to the SLMC. In order to spread its ideas and unite the people outside the North East and ensure its own political ascendancy, the SLMC made use of the UNP and the PA and succeeded in its strategy, which cut across the religious barrier and brought other people into its fold.31

The highlights of the SLMC’s ascendancy in these elections were the following: In the 1988 Presidential election, the Presidential candidate Premadasa could not secure the required vote and sought the support of Ashraff for gaining the votes of Eastern Province Muslims to become President.32 In the 1989 general election, by gaining four seats in Parliament for its candidates, the SLMC won the political status of an independent party representing Muslims. After the 1989 poll, occupying the opposition seat Ashraff asserted the rights of Muslims and protested against the atrocities unleashed against the Muslims. His voicing of the cause of the Muslims in Parliament popularized the party throughout the island in the 1994 election. In the Presidential elections conducted in 1994 and 1999 the SLMC became a major factor in the PA Presidential candidate Chandrika Bandaranaike winning the elections. Although she made a sweeping victory in the 1994 elections, a considerable number of votes of Muslims contributed to made her victory. In the 1999 election, the SLMC was the sole factor determining her victory.

In campaigning for the Muslim vote and there has to be an approach to securing adequate representation of Muslims in the various districts of Sri Lanka, the approach

32 W.G. Goonerathne and R.S. Karunaratne (eds), n.35, p. 538.
cannot be uniform. It needs to be tailored to the specific nature of the constituency. For example, one cannot treat the Muslims of Ampara district similarly with the Muslims of Monaragala, Ratnapura, Jaffna, Hampantota, Badulla, Kegalle and Kurunagala. The representation of Muslims in the 41 per cent Muslim-populated Ampara district can be achieved in spite of political wedges, divisions and party differences. But in places like Hampantoata, Badulla and Kegalle where Muslims are 1 per cent, 4 per cent and 5 per cent respectively the problem is different. Only if they consolidate their votes they can achieve something and have the district-level problems rectified. But if they divide their votes among contending interests, those who compete for the Muslim votes would win. The national parties wooing and winning Muslim votes would get a boost in their image but the net result would be detrimental to Muslims. In the absence of charismatic leadership the party being amorphous in a district makes strong district-level representation difficult. If it were to be advocated that in a democratic polity Muslims should be free to choose their candidate and party, there would not be any to choose from. To have communal change, community solidarity in voting pattern is required.

Socio-economic Development

"The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress having been formed in the context of the violent conflict occurring in the Eastern province, necessarily was more concerned with issues of security and self-defence than with the middle class desire for upward economic mobility".33 The civil war between the Tamils and the Government ruined the economy of the Muslims. While the conventional Muslim leaders were either

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insensitive or disinterested, the SLMC has been made efforts to revive and develop the economy of the Muslim community. A former MP from Kalmunai and a critic of the SLMC, A.R.M. Mansoor, commented: “Being an MP of the Eastern province, I am aware of the problems of those people. Their major issues are unemployment and economic hardships. They are now gradually being solved. In today’s context only self-interested persons, capitalizing on today’s situation are engaged in this type of party (Muslim Congress) works.”

The leader of the SLMC, when he was invited to join the new government in 1994, demanded the Ministry of Shipping and Port and Rehabilitation and Reconstructions, with a view to provide employment in the community. The People’s Alliance government also approved harbour construction at Oluvil. Many Muslims feared that once the harbour was constructed immigrants settling in the area would swamp the regional majority status of Muslims but the SLMC withstood the pressure. The proposal has been accepted and conceded knowing of the importance of the plan. After several feasibility tests in the South Eastern shores, spending million of rupees, Oluvil harbor was started and immediately another 23 million rupees were spent for the erection of a lighthouse, which stood at 84 feet height. Even though, the Government initiated the project, it was in the hands of contemporary Muslims leaders to complete the project successfully.

To operate and repair the port equipment a workshop has been constructed. Its training programmes have benefited many Muslim students. The harbour construction

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has facilitated interaction among the people of the East and Monaragala districts and facilitated the export process, benefiting the local people and the nation’s economy. Muslims especially have benefited from the increased scope for agriculture and commerce.

When the SLMC became a partner in the government in the second phase, the Muslim representatives took up the overall cause of Muslims and allocated benefits accordingly. Muslims benefited from the employment opportunities allocated for the minorities at the port. The Muslims of the South also benefited from the boost given to the export and import trade. The Eastern Province Muslims, who were severely affected by the terrorist activities, were compensated with millions of rupees. A higher proportion of jobs in the harbour was granted to Ampara district, which benefited the Tamils also. Although a harbour has existed in Trincomalee in the Eastern Province, the terrorist activities in the region have prevented the improvement of its operational facilities. In view of this, the establishment of a harbour in the South East has been suggested.

The SLMC’s work in the Rehabilitation Ministry has also benefited the displaced Muslims of the North East, who live in refugee camps. Their living conditions have been improved as also the avenues for employment. Relocation plans, model village, dearness allowance for government employees, schools for displaced students, scholarship plans, roads, power facility, parks, playgrounds, irrigation and drinking water facility, marriage allowance and other social development plans have been
charted out and millions of rupees spent on them.\footnote{Ministry of Fort, Shipping, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, "Displaced Northern Muslims and Contribution of People Alliance Government" (In Tamil) (Colombo: 2000), p. 25.} In the harbor and power council, a few hundred jobs were given to Muslim youths without considering their voting behaviour. The displaced Muslims in Putalam benefited from the efforts of the SLMC, though their Parliament representative is not a member of the SLMC.

One-third of Sri Lanka’s Muslim population is concentrated in the North-East and the rest is scattered throughout the island. The SLMC’s socio-political activities have been mainly aimed at unifying the Muslim community. In this it has been successful to a great extent in the North-East, and thereafter to some extent in Colombo and the South. The success has been less in areas where the Muslim population has been scattered.

The SLMC’s political base being in the North East, its electoral successes in this region earned it powerful portfolios. The public sector employment that came to the lot of Muslims was divided among the Muslims of the North East, predominantly farmers and artisans. This increased the popularity of the SLMC among Muslims.

**Unifying the Community**

The SLMC’s socio-political and judicial activities were mainly aimed at unifying the Muslim community and it was successful to a great extent in the North East. Later, Muslims of Colombo and the south also accepted it. One third of the Muslim population is concentrated in the North –East and the remaining two third is scattered outside the North East through out the island. It has to be agreed, however, that the
efforts were successful to a certain level only, because of scattered Muslim population all over the country.

The SLMC has put forward every effort to diminish all divisions of the Muslims and unify them. The SLMC had its fundamental base at North East through which it politically achieved lucrative portfolios. However, the benefit of such portfolios being divided equally made the radicals among Muslims. The public sector employments, chiefly, dominated by the Muslims of Colombo were divided among the Muslims of North East, those who are predominantly farmers and artisans. This stretched a commonality among all Muslims to come forward and effectively support the SLMC for its progress.

The actions and efforts made by the SLMC and its founder leadership regarding the protecting of political and religious rights, cultural values, education and other aspects can be vividly understood by the following statement made by Ashraff:

Therefore, I would call up this house, the government and the Maha Sanga to ensure that every precaution is taken constitutionally and otherwise to preserve, promote and protect the Islamic and the Muslim political, cultural and religious identity…. if for example a legally elected government does not want to recognize the rights of the people, their ethnic or religious identity culture, values, and their right to community life and their right to defend their lives and properties and perpetuate on such people injure, torture, oppression and discrimination.37

Tertiary Education

The Muslim students' college education suffered severely in the 1980s when genocidal ethnic tension erupted between Tamils and Muslims. Many Muslim students studying at Jaffna University and Eastern Universities were compelled to give up their studies. This bitter experience made the students and academics conscious of the need for a separate educational institution for Muslims in Muslim-majority areas. The demand was made for a separate university for the peaceful academic progress of hundreds of displaced Muslims. A separate Unit was set up for the purpose but was withdrawn after the administration of the Eastern University assured the security of the students. But the threat to the Muslim students' security increased, giving momentum to the demand for a university in a peaceful Muslim area where Muslim students could have uninterrupted education. As a result, the South Eastern University College was established at Addalichanai on 23 October 1995, which was converted into a full-fledged university on 27 October 1996. It is a national university where persons belonging to any community can study, though there were demands to make it a Muslim University.
Primary and Secondary Education

The SLMC has reconstructed the schools damaged in the civil war and also developed the educational facilities to Muslims outside the North East. For example, three new schools and 34 classrooms for 24 schools were established in Putalam district where Muslims of the North are scattered, at an expense of Rs. 320 lakh. Deserving poor students are given scholarship to continue their education. Some Muslim schools have been nationalized, such as Mawanalla Zaheera, Weligama Araffa, Colombo Hameed Al Hussain and Malvanai-Al Mubarak. The need for a Muslim college for higher studies, including research, has also been pointed out. Efforts are being made to establish a Muslim college exclusively for boys similar to the college for Muslim girls at Kandy.

Cultural Aspects

Attempts have been made to reinstate the arts, sports and cultural features among the Muslim community. A highlight of this activity is the attempt to celebrate ‘Miladun Nabi’ as a community affair. The leadership of the SLMC penned a book, “Muslims of Ampara District” to revive the culture and tradition of the community. A museum to reflect Muslim culture and tradition was established in the South Eastern University during the celebration. The Muslims consider the South Eastern region as the homeland in which Sri Lankan Muslim culture and tradition is deeply rooted.

41 Muslim Cultural Ministry, Muslims of Ampara District (Colombo: Muslim Cultural Department, 1997).
Women’s Development through Education

The political behaviour of the Muslim community before the birth of the SLMC was deplorable due to illiteracy and votes were sold for money and intoxicants. Particularly, the participation of women had been reduced to an insignificant level. Until independence Sinhala chauvinists and Tamil elites demanded to curtail the voting rights of women. Islamic organizations, despite their cultural orthodoxy were silent on this matter while contributing to the educational development of women. With the revival of education initiated by Siddi Lebbe and supported by Orabi Pasha, the orthodox Muslim community favoured the educational development of women through Zahira School and Colleges. Although these schools had not much support from the majority governing parties, except during the time of Badi-Uddin-Mohumed, the SLMC made every effort to lift up the standard of these schools. The political behaviour of Muslim community before the birth of the SLMC was deplorable due to illiteracy and votes were sold for money and intoxicants, particularly, participation of women had been reduced to an insignificant one.

The SLMC enhanced the political participation of women and they have started viewing it as their fundamental right. They started questioning the aristocrats of the administration and officers. After becoming partners in constituting the government, the SLMC favoured the rejuvenation of these colleges and fostered their development. This, in turn, enhanced the support base of the SLMC since Muslim women had attained the right to ballot with the support of the SLMC. The Muslim women are

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enlightened and are out of family pressure in deciding their political choice. The Muslim women whose lot was one of suppressed and oppressed have become politically conscious even their partner could not force them to cast vote against their desire and will.

Awareness was inculcated among the women either directly or indirectly by the SLMC itself. The Ladies Congress, an affiliated body of the SLMC, found support from women. The South Eastern University is also expected to mark a milestone of Muslim women’s education.

Disunity in the SLMC

Ashraff’s demise was a severe setback to the party. When the position of leadership became vacant, a scramble for office started, destroying Ashraff’s dream of unity. While the whole Muslim community was mourning his loss, there was in-house fighting among the party leaders, as there was no nominated successor. The nationalist government also attempted to exploit the situation to its advantage.

Finally, the joint leadership was replaced at the top, where there were deviations within the structure resulting in general weakness in the bargaining power.\textsuperscript{43} Conditions like ‘unconditional support to the government’, ‘100 days deadline’ for appointing certain commissions, and ‘income and expenditure promises’ confirm this view. In reality, the need for independent Muslim politics for government making has quantitatively increased at present, but the SLMC leadership has no distinctive

\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Prof. K.M. De Silva (Emeritus Professor), Director, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, Sri Lanka, during fieldwork in March 2005.
bargaining ability unlike earlier. Though in-house conflict is one reason for the emasculation, the major failure lies in the inability to conceive a workable strategy. Muslim politics is stumbling today and the erstwhile vigour is missing the SLMC's performance. Expediency seems to be its guiding principle in seeking berths in the country's political set-up rather than a genuine interest to serve the Muslim community.

Although they close to the level of resolving the leadership problem of independent politics, it did not contribute in any significant way. Similarly it is narrow based motivated for insufficient benefits, post and power. It seems that these leaders are once again trying to sail through the ignorance of the Muslim community. At a time when Muslims survival and unity are being tested, the actions of these leaders do not suggest any of their authority constructively. After 2002, even the pro-nationalist Muslims appear to be powerless. The absence of viable competition from a potential person like Ashraff may be the reason. The little freedom that the community enjoyed earlier is curtailed.

There is no meaning in becoming partners of the coalition government without correspondingly serving people. Either healthy partnership or independent party anticipation in the opposition shall be their aim. The founding leadership had richly left his party with adequate experience models and guidelines. In case of reflecting it, expediency may emerge out of Muslim politics.

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44 Interview with Prof. Gamini Samaranayake, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, during fieldwork in April, 2004
Observations made by critics on the SLMC

The founding of the SLMC was criticized on many counts. Many, including Muslims, considered that a separate party was not necessary for Muslims. UNP leaders such as M.H. Muhammad and A.R.M. Monsoor criticized the party as communal. They considered Ashraff as a self-seeking politician, whom shrewd Muslims would never follow. They predicted doom for a party with the limited character of a communal party.\(^45\)

Ashraff was also accused of being excessively pro-Muslim. Activities such as providing more jobs and compensation for Muslims through his ministry, creating of the South Eastern University in order to benefit the Muslim students, attempt towards establishing a party of Muslim majority and forcing government to restrain from some anti-Muslim activities, built up this impression.

In a multi-ethnic state, it is the duty of the government to fill vacancies according to the proportion of different ethnic groups and provide adequate share in all developmental schemes to all communities. In fact, Ashraff did not succeed in delivering a justifiable share to the Muslims. He was unable to fill the minority seats in the Harbour Power Council. His giving hundreds of seats in a single stroke to Muslims was criticized as being illegal, but Ashraff was only rectifying the mistake of the earlier governments of not filling vacancies duly.

The majority communities also accused Ashraff of dismantling their sacred structures but in a television debate with a majority Buddhist monk, Rev. Soma, the SLMC

\(^{45}\) *The Island*, 11 January 1987.
leadership refuted all charges, including one accusing Ashraff of spending enormous sums on Muslim welfare. In fact, Ashraff undertook the renovation of Deeghavapi pilgrim spot,\textsuperscript{46} which was neglected by the Sinhala leaders. The SLMC also worked for communal harmony. Though all the political activities of the party were centred around Ampara district, it did not neglect other districts. In fact, some regions of Ampara district themselves were neglected, e.g. Akkaraipathu and Pothuvil. The SLMC strongly opposed discrimination on the lines of party and region.

Ashraff’s actions, however, showed a bias in favour of Ampara district. Though the Trincomalee Muslims clearly supported the SLMC in electoral battles, the party did not make sufficient efforts for the progress of this underdeveloped area.

When the UNP delegated M.H. Sheikh Izzadeen for preparing the national list of representatives, Ashraff made him to resign and appointed a person belonging to his own constituency, Attaullah, in a clear an act of regionalism. He could have allotted the representation to any region under Trincomalee or Ampara districts. Ashraff also took back the sub-ministry from the representative of the North and allotted it to the Ampara district representative. The justification may have been that Ampara district was the heart of Muslim politics and there was a felt need for providing strength to Muslims through Ampara district. Ashraff’s attempts to allocate three seats for his community, however, ended in dismal failure. Meanwhile, the UNP in order to undermine the SLMC appointed Sheikh Izzadeen from Ampara district but Ashraff prevented a rebuff to his party by diplomatically refurbishing the political equation.

\textsuperscript{46} It is located in the Digamadulla Electoral District.
The Muslim representation in Parliament was honoured only when it was made by the SLMC.

The Muslim majority demand put forward by Ashraff actually contained only a limited number of Muslims. The demand although became matter of criticism stating Ashraff neglecting other Muslims’ living outside the chosen region, the demand had to be seen in the light of a symbolic arrangement conceived to give a major identity for Muslims in the political process of Sri Lanka. It can also be viewed as a security arrangement the need of which learnt from the experience of the past, wherein they were subjected to massacre and ethnic cleansing.

CONCLUSION

In the SLMC’s strategies for formation and identification, five broad approaches may be observed, demarcated into distinct phases.

In the first phase (1981-88), the SLMC’s character was similar to a mass movement. Aspects like politicization of masses were broadly spoken using Islamic ideals and idioms. The political base was established during this phase.

In the second phase (1988-93), the SLMC assumed the political leadership of the people directly without adjustment in basic principles. It collaborated with the UNP, which was viewed by every party as an opponent, after it failed to come to an understanding with the SLFP. In collaborating with the UNP, it attained certain common goals even at the sacrifice of its own short-term interests. The leadership did
not bargain for any lucrative offices. They demanded two representations through the national list but easily settled for one. This portion is largely discussed in Chapter Six.

In the third phase (1993-2000) after defeat in the elections, the SLMC recognized the importance of national parties. Therefore it aligned with national parties and even took charge of lucrative offices. Some of these tactics put in doubt the consistency of its early pronouncements and statements. Hence, there was a need to reassure its basic principles by convening a conference to adopt its own constitution.

The fourth phase, a brief one, was when the SLMC took on a national character for itself by forming the NUA, which was said to be a sister organization. But before the implications of this phase could be observed the primary leadership of the SLMC passed away.

The fifth phase is a continuing one. Now there is rivalry between the National Unity Alliance (NUA) presided over by Mrs. Ferial Ashraff and the SLMC headed by Rauf Hakeem. Both profess the values and ideals imparted by Ashraff. A split is visible in the SLMC led by Rauf Hakeem, especially in the instances of power sharing with other communities.

The SLMC followed various strategies to fortify itself. Among these were, strengthening the party and attracting the common people through electoral propaganda, religio-cultural fortification, emphasizing its own identity, learning from past political experiences, safeguarding the community from ethnic conflict, organizing hartals and protest, securing community privileges, and formation of the
National Unity Alliance to serve at the national level. In the initial period the SLMC was trying to mobilize the Muslims through the propaganda of Islamic ideology that brought lot of criticism from the national mainstream. To respond to such criticism Ashraff formed the National Unity Alliance (NUA), which also made lot of effort to project itself in a better light while being in the opposition.

The need for rolling back to community-centred mobilization, improving the bargaining power, re-strengthening the party through proper planning at several levels, political gimmicks of going its own way, establishing unity within diversity, can be suggested as possible means to overcome the disarray of the SLMC. Further, the community should be cleaned of power hunger and personality cult that obstructs the path of full politicization and cause needless confusion about the political goals of the Muslim community.