

SLMC is to face yet another split..?

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The establishment of the SLMC in the middle of the 1980s was a significant phenomenon in the development of Muslim politics. The party promised security and rights for the Muslims, particularly the North-East Muslims and adopted electoral democracy to channel the demands. Late Mr. Ashraff, the former member of the Federal Party led by Mr. S.J. Selvanayakam, and his eastern colleagues were the major engineers of the party.

The SLMC clearly stressed the point that “it was a party pledged to follow the Quran and the Sunnah.” For Muslims, these two sources are the key guidance, and they would prepare to do anything including hatred toward non-Muslims, if they were convinced with the arrangements pointed in Quran and Sunnah.

Marhoom M.H.M. Mr. Ashraff’s following statement well proved his and his party’s resentment against the Tamil Tigers and the commitment towards the Muslim community.

“If the LTTE is killing us, if the LTTE is leaving us out of our homes, simply because we happen to be Muslims, simply because we say “La ilaha illallahu, Mammmdur-Rasoolullah” because of our belief in Allah and Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) ... if that is the only reason, it is the commandment of the Holy Quran that we should declare Jihad against them and kill every LTTEer. We shall now intend to slaughter every LTTEer including Mr. Prabhakaran. In a personal note, I will be the happiest if I can die in battle at the time of slitting the neck of this bloody Prabhakaran (emphasises are not in the original).

Mr. Rauf Hakeem, key charismatic present leader of the SLMC, filled the leadership gap when Mr. Ashraff life was concluded with tragic air accident on September 16, 2000. Mr. Hakeem who hails from the central Sri Lanka decided to follow in the footsteps of late Mr. Ashraff with some notable flexibility. He met the LTTE boss, Mr. Pirabakaran on the 13th of April, 2002 and signed landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The MoU promised some reconciliation between the Tamils and the Muslims. But critiques did not suggest any radical improvements in the region.

Essentially, the death of Mr. Ashraff deeply disturbed the unity of the SLMC. Several factions emerged within the party’s ranks.

Major split of the party began with Mrs. Ferial Ashaff and followed by Athaullah, Harees, Late Anver Ismail, Hussein Baila, Rishad Bathiudeen, Majeed, Ameer Ali, Noushad and recently K.A. Baiz.

Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) National Organizer and Deputy Minister of Livestock Development in the Rajapaksa Administration, Baiz, sprang into the limelight and notoriety on September 23, 2007, when he flaunted his pistol before large crowds in Puttalam and threatened to shoot a fellow Muslim Minister Rishad Bathiudeen, if he were to set foot in the district again. This led to the suspension of Mr. Baiz from his party office till an inquiry into his conduct in Puttalam clears him.

Following the suspension, Baiz started to throw allegations against his leader Hakeem within the party level at high command and other meetings. It has even come to the public when Baiz opened his fires on Sunday at a political interview program conducted by a private television channel. He infact made series of serious allegation against Hakeem saying that even no body knows where the Party account was maintained. When asked about his stand on budget voting at the third reading, he pointed out that even the party leadership decides to vote against the budget he and his party colleagues would not follow the leadership as Hakeem does not have any clear future plans. He also said that he was opening a door to the other SLMC parliamentarians to speak

out their grievances to the public and made an appeal to his fellow members to use all the available media to carry on this task. So it is an obvious sign that Baiz is preparing to make another split in the party.

Whatever said and done, many believed that Muslim political representatives had lost the common program to win security and rights for Muslims: they failed to win any legitimate say in the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002 as well as Post-Tsunami Operation Management Structure (PTOMS) of 2005 concerning tsunami and peace talks. The Muslim political elite's inability to make the right choices and policies to win Muslim interests largely frustrated the Eastern Muslims who had mounted their trust in the moderate democratic Muslim leadership. The section of the Muslim youths from the East believes that the major purpose of the SLMC is just to formulate policies to win public offices for themselves.

There is a tendency in the East among the Muslim youths to seek non-democratic alternatives to channel their desires. Such a tendency can be attributed to the theory, which reads the roots of illiberal movements at a point, when liberal forces radically fail their constituencies. It is important to mention that breakdown of the Tamil moderate legitimacy among the Tamil masses couple with the Sinhala oppression against the Tamils comfortably opened the way for the Tamil radicalism and violence against the state and its institutions. The same could likely occur in the Muslim polity, if democratic voices of the Muslims just focus on winning perks, position and promotions for their family and members as their Southern Muslim counterparts successfully do since independence.

The logic of the SLMC politics does not suggest any new shift. The same old policy to win Muslim votes, in order to secure cabinet portfolios and perks. It seems there is a slight tendency among the eastern Muslims to reject such a narrow minded politics. Failure of democratic voices may trigger more instability and chaos. Muslims of the North and East may experience such a transformation when democratic political representations crash the expectations of the masses.