



Bridge between faiths Mufti M.I.M. Rizwi, president of All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, speaks while Aggamaha Panditha Venerable Kotugoda Dhammawasa Thero looks on

Wave of anti-Muslim strife grips Sri Lanka

A mere four years after silencing the LTTE-led Tamil separatists, extremist Sinhalese Buddhists find new target to vent their ire

By YUSRA FARZAN, Staff Writer

Ameen Mohammad* sits in a corner of his clothes shop in central Colombo, Sri Lanka, poring over the company's accounts. The numbers do not look good; business has been bleak over the last few months. He says it is because he is Muslim. "We have experienced a steady drop in sales since January because the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) had put up posters around the country telling people not to shop at our stores because our company is Muslim-owned. They threaten to take violent action against people who do," says the father of three.

"A woman came into our store and said she had parked her vehicle a few blocks away because her husband had warned her it was dangerous to be seen at our store. Once she was done shopping, we had to use an unmarked bag to package her items because she was afraid of getting attacked if she was seen carrying a bag with our logo."

After 30 years of civil war, racial tension is rearing its ugly head again in the picturesque island country.

Last April, 2,000 Buddhists, including monks, protested and attacked a mosque in Dambulla, a city in central Sri Lanka, claiming the mosque had been built on a sacred Buddhist site. A spate of incidents targeting the Muslim population quickly followed, with the mostly Buddhist government ordering the relocation of the mosque, resulting in the closure of a few mosques around the country.

A series of incidents has taken place since: Muslim community members in Kurunegala, in north central Sri Lanka, were forced to sign documents, allegedly by Buddhist monks, and made to promise they would not use the place for religious activities.

Last October a group of unidentified men set fire to a mosque in the historic city of Anuradhapura. Then in December, protests broke out in the southern city of Ratnapura, calling for a boycott of Muslim-owned businesses and halal-certified products and severing of ties with Muslims, followed by anti-Muslim rallies in the western city of Kulliyapitiya and central town of Warakapola.

Things came to a head last month when about a thousand people protest-

ing in the capital against halal logos on packaging turned violent, injuring some members of the BBC crew covering the protests. The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the body that issues halal logos in the country, quickly reacted, agreeing to remove them from all local products. Imported products can still carry halal logos.

Minority Rights Group International, an NGO, says the BBS, or the "Buddhist power force", a hardline nationalist group demanding Sri Lanka be a Buddhist country, is believed to be at the forefront of the ongoing hate campaigns. "[They] have an active social media campaign through which they publicise stories about Muslim-owned businesses and hate campaigns," says Mohammad. "They have ensured that beef is not sold in the central city of Kandy and because of this around 200 families have lost their livelihood. If business does not pick up, I too will have to let go of some staff. Even though we are a small community, we are easy to identify — girls walk around in the hijab and abaya, the mosques call out the azaan and you can easily spot boys in white with the fez cap leaving madrasas. This has angered them."

Muslims make up close to 10 per cent of Sri Lanka's 20 million people, while Buddhists make up 70 per cent, according to the latest statistics released by the Department of Census and Statistics. The BBS says its campaign is to protect the predominant Sinhalese race, who, they claim, are dwindling. Thousands of Sinhalese and Tamils were killed during the 30-year-old conflict started by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose purpose was creation of an independent Tamil state. The LTTE was defeated in 2009.

The underlying tensions signify a worrying trend, says aspiring lawyer Akiel Deen, a Muslim: "They now seem to be trying to continue their campaign with a new push for abolishing the abaya. While we don't know how successful their efforts will be, as a whole, their actions thus far have resulted in a feeling of social discomfort for the Muslims."

Still, the 23-year-old says, anti-Muslim sentiments are held by only a few, and do not reflect those of the majority. "Nevertheless, the vast number of non-Muslims opposed to the BBS is a heartening sign and signifies solidarity with

the local Muslims, which most are happy about," Deen says.

N.M. Ameen, the chairman of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, does not think the issue will escalate into full-blown community strife.

"It is against the law for [the BBS] to protest against [religious attire], and the freedom to practise one's religion is in our constitution," he says.

The problem, he adds, is a misunderstanding. "Non-Muslims are not aware of what the term halal means and unfortunately the Muslim community in Sri Lanka lacks a platform to educate the public on what halal and haram mean," Ameen says. "While the five Muslim ministers in the government are trying to solve this issue amicably, unfortunately we do not have that strong a voice to do so."

"The government has taken steps to dispel these tensions. Anti-Muslim posters have been taken down and those propagating hate crimes arrested. But it's going to be a while for the anti-Muslim sentiment to change."

Some, such as Nabeel Ahmad*, one of the directors of a processed food company, say they have complied with the ban on halal logos on their products.

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consumer," Ahmad says. "If the ban will end all the ethnic problems in this country we are quite happy to oblige and carry on." But despite being the most vulnerable to the halal law, Ahmad says business has not been affected so far.

Cloth retailer Mohammad believes outside forces are responsible for simmering tensions.

"The Tamil diaspora living abroad is still active in spite of the Sri Lankan government finishing off the LTTE and I am sure they are convincing the Norwegians to incite these problems. I have these suspicions because Norwegians funded a temple in Pallekele in the central city of Kandy and they also funded a school in the southern city of Galle owned by the BBS," he said. "I don't see any other reason for the Buddhists to be angry with the Muslims. We have always lived in peace and worked with people from all races and religions in Sri Lanka."

Neelu De Silva*, a 25-year-old student, says the BBS is not representative of Buddhism or the views of other Buddhists.

"[They] are an extremist nationalistic movement that's using Buddhism as a shield for its activities," she says. "I think it's a brilliant scheme to deviate from the real underlying problems in Sri Lanka such as the skyrocketing prices of goods and services and corruption. It is a strategy used by politicians all over — stir up something and let it boil into a massive issue."

"The Tamils have India, the Muslims have many countries that are predominantly Islamic but for us, the Sinhalese, it is just Sri Lanka. The moment they feel like they might lose this identity, they get worked up. The only people enjoying the happenings in the country and laughing at it are the supporters of the LTTE."

Inura Jayasuriya, a practising Buddhist and well-known television personality, agrees: "All I know is somebody at college has told my friend's sister to stop wearing the scarf to college; I want to find out who this someone is and tell him off," he says. "Buddhism is not about being radical or about eradicating other religions. It teaches us coexistence. This is all the work of a few extremists who seem to be creating another platform for another ethnic conflict."

■ Some names have been changed to protect identities.