



World Directory of Minorities

Asia and Oceania MRG Directory → Sri Lanka → Muslims

Print Page

Close Window

Muslims

Profile

The major groups that make up Sri Lankan Muslims are Sri Lankan Moors, Indian Moors and the Malays. Muslims also include smaller Islamic sects including the Boras and the Kolas. The term 'Moor' has historically been applied to Muslims of Arab origin, though 'Moors' are largely believed to also include Muslims of Indian origin. The Malays are Muslim immigrants from South Asia who arrived in the country during Dutch colonial rule in the 17th century. The Moors make up the larger majority of Muslims in Sri Lanka. Out of the total population of more than 1.5 million Muslims in Sri Lanka, over one-third lives in the north and east. The majority of these live in the East, where they constitute about a third of the population, which has roughly equal proportion of Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils. The remaining Muslim community is dispersed throughout the urban centres of Sri Lanka. Muslims are also divided between mainly agriculturists living in the east, and traders who are dispersed across the island. Muslims of the eastern region speak Tamil.

Historical context

The increasing radicalization of Tamil politics, especially the shift in Tamil demands from federalism to secession, drastically affected Tamil-Muslim relations. Muslims are strongly opposed to becoming a minority within a Tamil-speaking and Tamil-dominated homeland consisting of the Northern and Eastern provinces. In 1990, the LTTE began a purge of all Muslims living in the north some 70,000 lost their homes over night and most remain in displaced camps. Muslims were the victims of attacks in the Eastern Province, which had the objective of clearing the region of non-Tamils. During 1990, 130 Muslims were gunned down at the Kattankudy mosque. In the same year a 160 were killed in a mosque attack in Eravur. Muslims also have become target of others gruesome massacres by the LTTE, and this led some Muslim political leaders in 1992 to discuss the needs for a jihad, or holy war, to defend their religion. Throughout the conflict and even during the most recent cease-fire Muslims in the east faced attacks, land loss, intimidation, harassment, abductions and extortion by the LTTE.

The formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in the 1980s enabled Muslims to adopt a distinct political profile. The main demand of the SLMC - in the face of Tamil separatist demands for merger of the north and east - has been the creation of a separate regional council for Muslims in the east. The devolution proposals put forward by the PA government after it came to power in late 1994 were welcomed by the SLMC, but there was little progress with these proposals. After the cease-fire between the government and LTTE in 2002, the Muslims expressed concerns that their own rights will be undermined by the Tamils of the Eastern regions.

Though the SLMC held powerful political positions and thanks to Sri Lanka's proportional representative system of election was able to play kingmaker with new governments, in recent years the Muslim party has lost its stature. The mysterious death of SLMC leader M H M Ashroff in a helicopter crash in 2000 left the party divided.

Despite the Muslims gaining political clout they continued to be affected by the conflict. The Muslims often found themselves trapped between both warring factions. They were particularly targeted by the LTTE for human rights violations including abductions, extortions and killings. The LTTE have also been responsible for taking over large amounts of lands from Muslims agriculturalists. Muslims were also affected by a spate of abductions and extortions conducted in the south of Sri Lanka that targeted big businessmen.

Current issues

Sandwiched between the Tamils rebels and government forces, the Muslims have been excluded from either a share in self-governance or an adequate social and political representation. During the most recent conflict ensuing in the north-east, violence erupted in Muslim-majority town of Muttur displacing thousands. Most Muslims have now returned to their homes but were not properly compensated and continue to face severe hardships because of the creation of high security zones in the area. The latest fighting in August 2007 in the north west of Sri Lanka has also displaced hundreds of Muslims.

Amongst the major demands of the Muslims is creation of separate administrative entities in the north and east of Sri Lanka. As a marginalised community, their demand is for genuine equal treatment and recognition to practice their religion and follow their cultural values.

Worryingly, despite being severely affected by the conflict, Muslims continue to be marginalised in peace attempts. In the 2002 peace talks Muslims were not considered party to the process and were excluded from the series of negotiations.

powered by [the webbler](#)