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SRI LANKA BECOMING ‘SINHALESE-ONLY COUNTRY’

By
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Rajapaksas use religious issues to consolidate control.

Sri Lanka is undergoing a massive and dramatic transformation under the newly established Rajapaksa government, although one not unexpected. The dream to make the island a ‘Sinhala only’ territory was never so close to realization as today, nor was Sinhalese domination more pronounced and officially backed.

While Sri Lanka’s Rajapaksa family are politically more aligned with China than with India or the US, they seem to draw their inspiration solely from India when it comes to establishing the rule of a religious majority. Whereas the question of bovine slaughter has on a number of occasions triggered violence in India, the Rajapaksas, under pressure from monks and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, appear to be moving to the same direction.

The cabinet on September 30 unanimously approved a measure banning the practice after it was passed earlier by the parliamentary committee of the ruling party, headed by the prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

They thus appear likely to unleash Sri Lanka’s own saffron wave, one that would not only consolidate the hold of a particular ethnic and religious majority and create conditions of violence over bovine slaughter (and probably other questions as well), following in India’s footsteps. Crucially, it is a vehicle to allow the Rajapaksas to strengthen their political hold.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic country, one that for decades was riven by bitter ethnic strife between the Sinhalese, who make up an absolute majority of about 70 percent of the population, Muslims account for about 10 percent, and Hindus. From 1983 to 2009, a vicious civil war raged between the Sinhalese

and the Tamils, who make up 12 percent of the population and are predominantly Hindu with a scattering of Christians.

By the time the 25-year war was over, 80,000 to 100,000 people were dead - almost all of them Tamils - and the northern end of the island was in ruins. Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious mix, therefore, has an in-built space for exclusive ethnic domination. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the prime minister's brother who was elected president in 2019, has been branded a war criminal for allegedly ordering the execution of Tamil leaders and at least one newspaper editor in Colombo.

By appealing to religious-nationalist forces, the Rajapaksas, who saw the civil war to its destructive end, have traditionally relied on Sinhalese-Buddhist votes, aiming to make sure their majority doesn't slip away from their hands at a time when they are still struggling to grapple with myriad economic and political problems.

With Sri Lanka's opposition parties in complete disarray and internally divided, the proposal to introduce the ban appears to help the ruling family firmly establish a solid constituency among the religious (monks and Sri Lanka's Hindus) elements, and further reduce the space for liberal Sinhalese elements that opposition parties have traditionally represented.

It explains why Sri Lanka-based offshoot groups of Indian extremists like Shiv Senna have openly supported the proposal to ban bovine slaughter. While such slaughter isn't prohibited in Buddhist/Sinhalese culture, Buddhists still look upon the cow as a source of life and protecting the beasts helps an ordinary Sinhalese to become a "good Buddhist."

As such, it is not the first time the question of cow slaughter has become an issue. In 2009, the parliament discussed a private member's bill calling for a total ban on the slaughter of cattle presented by a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist, MP Wijedasa Rajapakshe. In September 2012, the Kandy Municipal Council passed a resolution banning animal slaughter within the municipal limits. In 2013, a 30-year-old Buddhist monk, Bowatte Indraratna Thero, committed self-immolation in Kandy protesting the killing of cattle by Muslims.

The decision, whereas it will certainly create a religious wedge between Muslims and Buddhists, also directly relates to politically cultivating a particular religious culture in ways that can be translated into political power.

Consider this: the Rajapaksas are already in the middle of passing Sri Lanka's 20th constitutional amendment. This amendment, if passed by the parliament -which is anyway dominated by the Rajapaksa party - would not only undo previous constitutional changes that tended to strengthen the parliament, but also allow the President to become a king, doing god's march on the earth.

The fact that the Rajapaksas have opened up this debate (and are personally supporting the ban) at a time when a legal battle over the amendment is being fought in Sri Lanka's Supreme Court shows that the question of banning bovine slaughter isn't just religious. It has strong political undercurrents related directly to the way the Rajapaksas aim to rule the country i.e., establishing an exclusive rule of the majority over a country that purportedly was always meant for Sinhalese people only, a belief that many in the current government strongly share.

By sidelining the opposition parties, by increasingly appointing former military men on civilian posts (Sri Lanka's military is almost exclusively Sinhalese), and introducing the proposal to ban bovine slaughter, the Rajapaksas are only making sure that the island becomes an exclusive territory of the Sinhalese.

As it stands, in addition to the appointment of ex-military officers into civil sector positions, the government has begun using the military in administrative roles. Since February 24, for example, Sri Lanka Corps Military Police personnel and their cars and motorbikes have been deployed to assist the Colombo City Traffic Division. The joint program will be supervised by the Army Commander Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva.

Military personnel are also being used to check the family backgrounds of unemployed graduates and diploma holders applying for jobs. Military officers are now involved in district secretariat panels interviewing graduates and diploma holders applying for new a job-creation program initiated by the new government.

It is thus hardly ambiguous that increasing militarization of politics corresponds to a direct Sinhalization of Sri Lankan politics and society as well.

In other words, both bovine slaughter ban and the military's increasing role in politics and day-to-day administration fit the same pattern and reflect Sri Lanka's saffron wave - religion-ethnic hegemony of the majority and their increasing ability to capture the political and economic structures of the state.

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