

Sri Lanka must act firmly on anti-Muslim violence

The sudden [spurt in violence targeting Muslims in Sri Lanka](#) may only be limited in comparison to previous racial attacks in the island, but it is serious enough to cast a dark shadow on ethnic relations. That it has caused enough concern and disquiet to warrant the [imposition of a state of emergency](#) across the island is a reflection of the prevailing precarious situation. This is the first time since 2011 that Colombo has had to invoke emergency provisions to bolster the security apparatus, indicating official concern that the current violence could escalate. As an urgently needed security measure, this is a crucial intervention as it enables the quick deployment of armed forces in areas of strife, and strengthens the hand of the law and order machinery. The reverberations of early incidents that took place in Kandy district are still being felt. The first spark that ignited the violence would have gone down as just an instance of road rage, as a Sinhalese truck driver was beaten to death by a group of Muslims for blocking their way. But this was followed by attacks on Muslim houses, business establishments and mosques. There was one more death, that of a Muslim man, whose burnt body was found in a house. Hardline Sinhala groups then waded in with rumour and inflammatory social media posts, adding to the incendiary mood.

Muslims, the third largest ethnic constituent in Sri Lanka, were not a party to the protracted armed conflict that ended in 2009. However, they were also victims then, suffering massacres and displacement at the hands of the Tamil militants. In the manner of their political mobilisation, they have remained an integral part of the Sri Lankan mainstream. In recent years, Muslims have been targeted by extreme right-wing groups, which are presumably looking for new enemies after the fall of the LTTE. The violence has sometimes been attributed to Sinhala majoritarian groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena. More recently, there was hate-mongering against the community in the backdrop of some Rohingya refugees seeking shelter in Sri Lanka. Post-war triumphalism had proved to be the undoing of the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, and it is the duty of the present rulers to avoid a relapse into ethnic strife. The present regime does not carry an anti-minority tag, but it has still attracted criticism for allowing an atmosphere of impunity to prevail over the last few days. It should strive to avoid the impression that hardliners in the majority community can get away with anti-minority intimidation and violence. President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe should redouble efforts to ensure that the authorities on the ground act with decisiveness and impartiality.

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