THE IMPACT OF SRI LANKAN MUSLIM CULTURE ON MUSLIM POLITICS

In the Context of the Ethno-Political Conflict of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Impact of Sri Lankan Muslim Culture on Muslim Politics in the Context of the Ethno-political Conflict

One of the key challenges faced by those engaged in developing a political solution to the ethno-political conflict of Sri Lanka is arguably the inconsistent political standpoints of the Muslim Community. The Muslims have distanced themselves from the Tamil political movement and have taken apparently reactionary and inconsistent political positions. While it can be argued that Muslims have not gained any major political advantage as a result of this inconsistency, it has certainly added to the complexity of the ethno-political conflict and has put the Muslims in confrontation with the Tamil political movement. Despite this, the strategy of inconsistency has continued. Therefore, one may argue that the Muslim political position is not just determined by political advantage but there could be other determinant factors to it, which are not necessarily political.

In this backdrop, the purpose of this research was to explore four aspects of Muslim culture as possible factors that influenced Muslim politics, with special attention to two key concepts: Co-existence, and Leadership. It examines how each of these concepts was practiced by the Muslims in the cultural and political contexts respectively. A qualitative methodology with inputs from prominent individuals representing cultural, religious, academic, political and social perspectives as well as perspectives from other communities was used.

This research helps to establish that Muslim culture and politics are paradoxically linked, and that Muslim culture – which is relatively exclusive – exerts pressure on the Muslim political establishment to maintain a position of assimilation with the mainstream politics of the South in order to mitigate its cultural exclusiveness. Consequently, it recommends that in the short term, those who attempt to develop political solutions to the ethno-political conflict should recognize the Muslims' need for political assimilation with the mainstream and make allowance for that in any proposed political structure, while in the

long term, Muslims should expand their channels of cultural interaction with other communities, and stop using politicians as their interface.