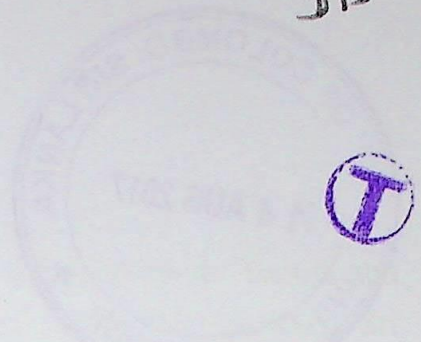


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TRENDS AND DYNAMICS OF MUSLIM POLITICS IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA

Political Evolution of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

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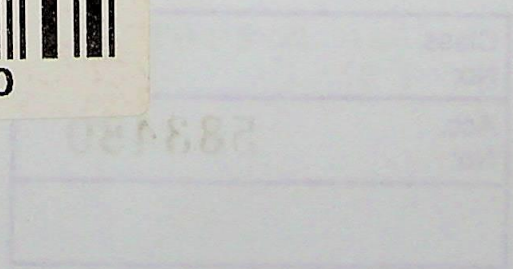
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April 2015



ABSTRACT

The study explores the intrinsic attachment of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) with its provincial constituency, by identifying the exceptional historical determinants and peculiar circumstances that made Eastern Province Muslims fashion an ethno-religious political party. Tracing political historiography through a phenomenological approach, it collates information and perceptions that explain the genesis and sustenance of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Through qualitative methods of interviews and observation of the actors involved, it explains the perspective of the party, which relies on ethno-religious identity as an instrument of mobilisation. The study is qualitative, using secondary quantitative survey data in only one instance. The field research for the study was conducted in Ampara District (Digamadulla), where the main constituency and political actors of the SLMC are located. The study contradicts the general premise, which is based on a conventional definition of ethnicised identity politics, that the new party was a Muslim counter-response to Tamil identity politics and Sinhalese majoritarian dominance. This study argues that the SLMC was the product of a political uprising of a regional community historically coerced into self-segregation and oppression by the traditional Muslim political leadership, which colluded with the majoritarian state and its colonial predecessor. The study identifies the critical and primordial difference in political aspirations of the Muslims of the Eastern Province. It frames their worldview and socio-economic outlook, which made them demand group-specific, territory-centric solutions. The socio-political aspirations of a community that found strength in their number in the Eastern Province were not shared by Muslims elsewhere, who found assimilative politics more congenial than overt assertions of identity politics. Hence, the study argues that the distinct socio-political history of oppression of the Muslims of the Eastern Province was never understood or articulated by the traditional Muslim leadership. The Eastern Province remained stratified in excluded neglect due to the passive acceptance of this marginalised existence. Yet, their numbers were co-opted in the Muslim politics of the new nation-state. The study argues that the SLMC is the political

manifestation of the aspirations of Muslims in the Eastern Province. It finds this population to comprise a subaltern people – the underdogs in the context of power in both colonial and immediate postcolonial periods. The thesis examines the relationship between structures and superstructures at the level of the subjected people. By revealing the links between the subjected and their subaltern status, it explains how Ashraff, the founder of the SLMC, understood and proceeded to remove the existing obstacles to social change. The study explains how the SLMC moved on and rejected the strategy of its political competitors, which remained in pliant collusion with the dominant political culture, thereby conceding an implied inferiority. The SLMC in contrast was an instrument of the polity that strived to transform its power status from subordination to leadership. The study examines how the party struggled at national and regional levels to construct its power base.