

## **Barriers to Muslim youth representation in local governance: A case study of the Bulathsinhala Pradeshiya Sabha, Kalutara District, Sri Lanka**

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Despite Sri Lanka's long history of multi-ethnic coexistence, Muslim youth remain severely underrepresented in local governance, particularly outside the Northern and Eastern provinces. This study focuses on the Bulathsinhala Pradeshiya Sabha in Kalutara District, where no Muslim youth has been elected for over two decades. Drawing on Youth Political Participation Theory (YPPT), the research analyzes how structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers intersect to limit minority youth engagement. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a survey of 50 Muslim residents, semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants, and the analysis of secondary sources, including election results and legal frameworks. Findings reveal that economic marginalisation restricts campaign capacity; political parties' selection processes and institutional practices limit access; low Sinhala proficiency and weak political literacy hinder civic engagement; cultural norms linking leadership maturity to age 40 discourage youth below 40 from contesting elections; and divisions within the Muslim community reduce mobilisation. These overlapping barriers illustrate how inadequate resources, restrictive opportunity structures, and cultural constraints converge to exclude Muslim youth from representation. The study recommends introducing youth quotas with provisions for minority inclusion, enhancing bilingual education in line with government policy, providing political literacy and mentorship programmes, and fostering community awareness to challenge cultural perceptions that inhibit youth leadership. Addressing these barriers is crucial to promoting equitable and inclusive governance in Sri Lanka.

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