

TRT  
**world  
forum**  
2018

**Closed Session**

# Muslim Minorities of South Asia



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**Closed Session**

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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognized as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

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## Background

**O**n October 4, 2018 TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on the Muslim Minorities of South Asia. This was part of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included eight public sessions and 11 closed sessions. This closed session was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

The session aimed to discuss the issue pertaining with the Muslim Minorities of South Asia, looking closely at India, Myanmar and Sri-Lanka. Historical factors in all three societies within the framework post-colonial timeline were discussed and analysed. Rising Islamophobia along-with emergence of hard-line Hindu and Buddhist sentiments has punctuated the anti-Muslim / minority attitude in these regions. In India, the current ruling government comes with the rhetoric of India being a Hindu state. Likewise in Myanmar and Sri-Lanka, Buddhist extremists have subjugated the Rohingya and Muslims population respectively. As the crisis seem to continue, experts called in to reach a joint collective international approach to curb down the hard-line attitudes against the Muslim minorities.

## Discussion themes of the session:

### The specific objectives of the meetings were to:

- Discuss the state of Muslim Minorities in three South Asian countries: India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.
- Provide a historical context of the issue.
- Different factors that have led to emergence of hard-line anti-Muslim sentiments across the countries.
- Prospect of working on a collective solution by introducing policies that will ensure participation of Muslim and Non-Muslim countries.

## Introduction

Political shifts around the globe in congruence with the emergence of far-right groups have evoked anti-immigrant sentiments in Western societies. Similarly, these sentiments remain intertwined with the pretext of Islamophobia, which facilitates negative perceptions of the Muslim population by associating them with terrorism and extremism. All these elements have also diffused in a number of countries in South Asia where Muslims live as minority communities.

The closed session, "Muslim Minorities of South Asia", was held on the 3rd of October 2018 with the participation of highly esteemed members from civil and political society, practitioners, and experts from around the world. It examined the cases of three countries in South Asia: India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The main speakers held expertise with regards to each region and brought to light a variety of historically rooted features that form part of the growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the contemporary landscape of these societies.

As historical background was provided on all three examples, the ongoing debate amongst the experts then moved onto a discussion of how to provide contemporary

solutions. The panel insisted on the need for international players and organisations to participate and influence a dialogue for peace and stability--especially in the case of Myanmar, where the Rohingya remain as one of the worst affected groups.

Queries were also raised touching upon the possible collective framework Muslim countries themselves can take in order to reach a solution. As much of the Muslim world remains entangled in its own political affairs, it was argued that Muslim organisations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and other humanitarian extensions apart from the United Nations must work together to overcome the problem.

Similarly, discussants also stressed upon and discussed the deteriorating international order and the fact that that few countries seem to respect or follow the United Nations mandate. As a result, the framework of international law needs to be combined with participation from all over the world in order to review and solve the problems facing Muslim minorities in the subcontinent that have been exacerbated by rising Islamophobia.

## The Historical and Current Context of Muslim Minorities in India

A historical backdrop of Islam and the Muslim population in India was given during the session. Islam first came to India during the 7th century when Arab traders<sup>1</sup> descended on the coast of Malabar in the South. Likewise, Islam also became part of the subcontinent through the province of Sindh during the Umayyad reign<sup>2</sup>.

Today Muslims comprise 14.2 per cent of the Indian population and remain concentrated in the North, East and the South. In the Southern region, there is hardly any animosity between different religious groups. However, a starkly different situation exists in the Northern part of India. The situation in northern India today is rooted in a 200 year legacy that can be directly traced back to the period of British colonialism.

The first speaker argued that after the British colonisers re-established their rule in India following the Indian Mutiny, or the first war of independence in 1857<sup>3</sup>, various "divide and rule" practices were employed by the British to maintain their rule over the so-called 'Crown Jewel' of the British Empire. As a result hostility began to emerge between different religious groups--most notably between Hindus and Muslims. The latter were vilified and portrayed as being inherently barbaric, regardless of the actual historical record.

Following the end of British rule in India in 1947, the Muslim population in the subcontinent were subsequently divided between the three newly independent states of West Pakistan (present day Pakistan), East Pakistan (present day

<sup>1</sup> Trade of high value goods in the early 7th and 8th century brought Arabs to the southern coasts of India, including Sri Lanka. As the coastal areas remained part of the silk-road, diverse groups of Muslim merchants settled and established their own communities, which grew with time through intermarriage, conversion and continuation of settlement.

<sup>2</sup> In the year 711 an Arab dynasty had settled in the northwest of India, in a region known as Sindh.

<sup>3</sup> In 1857 an uprising took place in India against the British East India Company's rule- Different names have been given to the event: The Sepoy Mutiny, the Great Rebellion, the Revolt of 1857 and India's First War of Independence.

Bangladesh), and India, with the organising principle of the former two being their Islamic orientation and their Muslim-majority populations. In India, the panel discussed the fact that while the law and constitution in theory treats all religious affiliations as equal, there remains significant discrimination against Muslim citizens. For instance, it was highlighted that in major cities like Mumbai, even if individuals belongs to the same socio-economic class, Hindus and Muslims cannot live in the same area.

Since 1961, a series of communal riots and anti-Muslim pogroms have dominated the political and social landscape of India. One particular example which was emphasised during the discussion was the Babri Masjid/Mosque incident.<sup>4</sup> Since the early 20th century, Hindu groups have sought possession of the site of the Mosque based on a belief that the location is the birthplace of Hindu god Ram. Subsequently, in 1949 a group of Hindu activists placed

their religious symbols idols inside the Mosque. In 1985 the issue was then carried forward by hard-line Hindu groups (proponents of the current ruling political party in India, the Bhartiya Janta Party) and it became a top national issue. Riots broke out at the site, and 3000 people were subsequently killed. In 1992 half a million Hindu extremists destroyed the mosque and demanded a temple be erected.

Although strong institutions exist in India, and the country's elites like to think of India as a working democracy, the Muslim population feel excluded due to the multitude of restrictions imposed on them by the government. The most recent issue, which has garnered international media attention, is the disenfranchisement of 4 million Muslims in Assam state. This is another facet of the growing problem faced by Muslim minorities in India, which have been exacerbated under the ruling of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).<sup>5</sup>

## The Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Post-Civil War Sri Lanka

Ever since the end of the Sri Lankan civil and the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - commonly known as the Tamil Tigers - the tide seems to have turned against a different community--the Muslims. To reflect on this, the speaker provided an anecdote of the Muslim traders in the past arriving in Ceylon<sup>6</sup> (Sri Lanka) and regarding it as "paradise". However, because of the hostility the Muslims face nowadays on a daily basis, "paradise" is hardly a candid depiction.

Sri Lanka is a multicultural and a multi-ethnic country with different religions and languages. The Buddhist community comprises the largest part of the population (70.1 percent), the Hindus represent 12.5 percent of the total population, the Muslims represent about 10 percent, and the remaining population is Christian.

The speaker then looked at the factors that followed the post-colonial rule after 1948. Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic state was consistently stressed, however, the imposition of the 1956 Sinhala act was also emphasised as an example of the state disregarding other linguistic and minority

groups. The Sinhala act puts the focus on Sinhalese, which is spoken by the majority of the Buddhist population, and made it the only official language of Sri Lanka. As a result, other minority groups were disregarded. In that regard, the Tamil language did not attain any official recognition, and the Tamil-speaking groups felt unaccounted for by the state.

Eventually, the constitution, enacted as Sri Lanka transitioned into a Commonwealth republic in 1972, provided even more importance to the Buddhist community, which led to the subservience of other minority groups, namely the Tamil speaking Hindus in that period. As the state failed to obtain a federal solution and work on disadvantages that accompanied the minority groups, this allowed various youth-led movements to surface, leading to the formation of militant organisations. A prime example is the LTTE. Despite the failure of the LTTE in the contemporary era, the civil war which embroiled in Sri Lanka for 60 years provided a lesson for the state: to look at an all-inclusive policy for the minorities of the country.

<sup>4</sup> The Babri Masjid was a mosque in Ayodhya, India. Located in Faizabad district, it was one of the largest mosques in the Uttar Pradesh state. According to the mosque's inscriptions, it was built in 1528-29 on orders of the Mughal emperor Babur.

<sup>5</sup> The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is one of the two major political parties in India, along with the Indian National Congress. As of 2018, it is the country's largest political party in terms of representation in the national parliament and state assemblies.

<sup>6</sup> Sri Lanka was previously known as Ceylon. As the country transitioned as a republic in the commonwealth it name changed to Sri Lanka in 1972.

However, the post-civil war period did not provide long-lasting solutions to prevent the resurgence of conflict. Currently, a hostile environment is being fostered by different hard-line Buddhist groups in post-civil war Sri Lanka against the Muslims. It was argued that various extremist organisations in Sri Lanka, namely Bodu Bala Sena, has connections with the 969 Movement in Myanmar. Both groups work to coordinate their anti-Muslim campaigns in their respective countries.

Muslim places of worship, businesses and places of residence have been regularly and deliberately targeted by mobs. An example was provided about a recent incident in the city of Kandy, where hard-line Buddhist mobs targeted 289 houses and destroyed 217 businesses in February 2018.

## The Stateless Rohingya in Myanmar

In order to form a clearer picture of the Rohingya crisis, special attention was paid to the historical background of the situation. The third speaker examined the independence of Myanmar (formerly Burma) from British rule in 1948. At the time, it was considered as the most progressive state in terms of ethnic rights and there were radio stations where the Rohingya language was broadcasted. This historical situation sets itself in contrast when one observes the condition of Rohingya today.

The community has now been gradually stripped off its rights. For instance, "Operation Dragon King" (1978), known officially as Operation Nagamin and sometimes translated as the King Dragon operation, was a military operation carried out by the Tatmadaw and immigration officials in northern Arakan, Burma, during the socialist rule of Ne Win. This operation was conducted the military in Myanmar, whereby many individuals from the Rohingya community were arrested and stripped away from their identification papers and any official documentation. An exodus then followed as 275,000 Rohingyas fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The government of Burma proclaimed at that time that the mass exodus signified that Rohingyas were in-fact "illegal immigrants".

Even though these immigrants were sent back in due course, the main crux of the issue re-emerged in 1982. A law titled "1982 Citizenship Law" was passed that deprived the Rohingyas from having citizenship in Myanmar. It deprived them of basic rights, imposed a restriction on education and promoted confiscation of the Rohingya lands by Buddhists. Similarly, attention was brought upon the present situation, where anti-Rohingya campaigns tend to be spread everywhere, and the community remains stigmatised as illegal immigrants. Moreover, the government invokes the anti-immigrant sentiment and puts the community in camps.

Similarly, the Rohingya were prevented from participating in the 2015 parliamentary election as voters or candidates. This was then followed by attacks against Rohingya villages by the military in 2016, which snowballed in 2017 into one of the largest crisis ever to face the community. As a result, more than 900,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh to seek refuge.

Remarks made by the United Nations and other practitioners were highlighted during the discussion. The Rohingya crisis has become a textbook example of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Human Rights groups argue that no action is being taken in the international arena and the UN Security Council has yet to provide a sustainable resolution to the Rohingya predicament. The speaker argued that Aung San Suu Kyu, a Noble Peace Laureate, denies the existence of the Rohingya, and therefore the ensuing problem. As a result, a solution from her government cannot be expected.

Significance was given to Bangladesh's role and support during the crisis. The speaker also stressed the need for more involvement of the international community.



## Final Remarks

An agreement was reached among the participants regarding the need for cooperative action to be taken between the international community and the representatives of these minorities on the ground.

Regarding India, even though the country remains stable with a functioning democracy, the current ruling Bhartiya Janta Party, with its hard-line Hindu Nationalist orientation has led Muslims and other minority groups to feel insecure in their own lands.

Likewise, in Sri Lanka, the state still fails to provide a solution to maintain and provide a harmonised platform for the various communities that make up the country. First, it was the Tamil-speaking Hindus that turned to

militancy and emerged as LTTE, leading the country into a six-decade civil war. However, Muslims have become at present the target for the dominant Sinhala community.

The case of Rohingya, on the other hand, exemplifies state repression at its worst. The Myanmar authorities negate the existence of millions from the minority group entirely. Regarded as stateless individuals, the Rohingya crisis in 2017 set itself a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

As light is shed on the above-mentioned three states, it becomes important for state and non-state actors, Muslim and non-Muslims to bring more awareness about the issues at stake.

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