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# Analyzing the Contributions of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Its Founder–Leader to Muslim Politics and Community in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** Historically, the politics of Sri Lankan Muslims has been identified as moderate and characterized by alliance-making with other major ethnic groups. Muslims rarely considered to form a strong political movement or party to increase their political influence, until the peak of the civil war in the 1980s. This occurrence helped the Muslim community to be facilitated socially and economically, but it also made them vulnerable in terms of rights and power accommodation in national politics. However, the establishment of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and its distinct form of politics progressively revived the Muslim community and its politics. This study examines the contributions of SLMC and its founder–leader to Muslim politics and community in Sri Lanka. The findings of this study reveal that SLMC under its founder–leader uniquely colored Muslim politics, which in turn strengthened popular support and transformed the Muslim community into “queen-makers” in the national politics. Under its founder–leader Mohammed Hussain Mohammed Ashraff, the SLMC greatly contributed to the transformation of Muslim political culture, and to the uplift of the socio-cultural, economic, and political status of the Muslim community, while voicing Muslims’ grievances and fighting for their status, rights, powers, and privileges. By contrast, the party and its founder–leader faced considerable opposition and criticisms on communal and racial bases. Nonetheless, the qualities and contributions of its founder–leader continue to be remembered and still have a significant influence on Muslims politics in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka; Muslim Politics; SLMC; MHM Ashraff; Muslim political leadership

## 1. Introduction

Muslims (referred to as “Moors” in ethnic grouping and official recording) are the second-largest minority ethnic group in Sri Lanka’s population and have traditionally expressed their political attitudes and behaviors in favor of the country’s two major ethnic groups—the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Although their ethnicity and religious–cultural features became highly targeted by the ethnic majorities, they continued to work with them and rarely attempted to form a stronger political force or party that opposed the ethnic majorities or to differentiate Muslim politics until the mid-1980s. A number of attempts to form Muslim political parties were made in the 1950s to 1970s, but all of these attempts failed because of the stronger affiliation of Muslims with the major pro-Sinhalese and pro-Tamil political parties (Aliff and Sarjoon 2010).

When ethnic conflict grew severe and the civil war intensified from the 1980s onwards, the Muslim community in the north-eastern region was abandoned politically by the political leaders of both

major ethnic groups and became vulnerable in terms of political representation and political voice. Although there was a number of Muslim parliamentarians and cabinet members representing the major political parties, they were helpless to advocate for Muslims' grievances and their rights because they were bound to the policies and principles of their parties. This context emphasized the importance of forming a distinct Muslim political party that would give voice to Muslims' grievances and safeguard the political interests of Muslims. Mohammed Hussain Mohammed (MHM) Ashraff (1948–2000), a senior lawyer and civil activist who hailed from Kalmunai town in eastern Sri Lanka, utilized this political context by mobilizing Muslim activists and supporters to form a Muslim political organization. The establishment of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) as a socio-cultural organization on the 21st of September 1981 under the patronage of Ashraff was the turning point in the emergence of a distinct and a strong Muslim political party. He officially declared the SLMC as a political party on 26 November 1986 (Aliff and Sarjoon 2010).

Ashraff formed his party's constitution and code of conduct based on the principles and guidelines of Islam, the *Al-Quran* and *Al-Sunnah* (the teachings of prophet Muhammad). With the considerable victories in successive elections in the following years, the SLMC secured a "queen-making" role in national politics in 1994. Until his sudden death in 2000, the SLMC's founder-leader Ashraff was not only a prominent Muslim political leader but also had considerable influence on traditional Muslim politics and contributed considerably to the transformation of Muslim political culture, and the uplift of the socio-economic and political development of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. His leadership qualities had unique features for Muslim politics, and he is still remembered as a "political sage" by many, regardless of their ethnic, religious, and political differences, including his critics and political opponents.

This study attempts to evaluate the contribution of the SLMC and its founder-leader MHM Ashraff to the Muslim community and their traditional politics in Sri Lanka. Although some studies have focused on the nature of traditional Muslim politics, and the emergence and role of the SLMC in Muslim politics, most of them are party-oriented and reviewed the electoral victories of the SLMC in the successive elections (see O'Sullivan 1999; Ameerdeen 2006; Imtiyaz 2013). A few studies have focused on the fragmentation of the SLMC's politics in the post-Ashraff era (see Bustø 2007; Fazil 2009). An extensive and comprehensive study of the influence and contribution of the SLMC under its founder-leader to the Muslim community and politics, and its related impact, is mostly lacking in the existing literature. This study attempted to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of the emergence and influence of the SLMC and its initial leadership in Sri Lankan Muslim and national politics.

## 2. Methodology

This study is historical and qualitative in nature. Historical research examines and interprets past events and people's actions to predict future scenarios. Historical research also identifies and describes clearly the ways in which the past differs from the present context. One of the major goals of historical research is to communicate past phenomena. This study argues that a historical review of the leadership qualities of MHM Ashraff and his new ways of politics through his political party, the SLMC, as well as his contribution to the Muslim community, can serve as guidelines for future political actions and reactions of Muslim politicians in Sri Lanka. To achieve this goal, qualitative data, mostly secondary in nature, were used in this study. They were collected from journal articles, literary books, newspaper cuttings, and internet sources. These data were reviewed and are presented in this work as quotations, summaries, and interpretive arguments. Interpretive research helps to understand the actions of people in social circumstances and situations. Thus, interpretive studies require researchers to go beyond providing simple descriptive or explanatory accounts of the phenomenon. They require researchers to interpret the phenomenon for the reader, which entails providing an interpretation of what it means, as well as what the phenomenon is. In this way, the researcher arrives at an interpretation of a phenomenon by developing (subjective) meanings of social events or actions (Sarjoon et al. 2016). In this study too, apart from reviewing his political actions, we tried to critically examine and interpret

the leadership qualities of MHM Ashraff and his contributions to Muslim politics and community through his political involvement in the SLMC. This kind of study helps understand the nature and actions of political leadership and the ethno-religious politics of the Muslim community in the context of intense civil war in Sri Lanka.

The rest of the paper is divided into three major parts followed by a conclusion. The next part reviews the nature of traditional Muslim politics in Sri Lanka until the establishment of the SLMC. This section is followed by an analysis of the formation of the SLMC and its influence on Muslim politics. While reviewing the historical background of the formation of the SLMC, this part identifies how the transformation of Muslim politics became distinctive. This part also examines the influence and contribution made by the SLMC under its founder–leader to the political culture of Sri Lankan Muslims and to the socio-cultural and economic development of the Muslim community. The next section critically examines the opposition and criticisms expressed toward the leadership of Ashraff and his path of district politics, which is followed by the concluding remarks. Although the influence of the SLMC and its founder–leader on Muslim and national politics in Sri Lanka remains vital particularly in the post-Ashraff era, this study has focused mainly on the political process and actions of the SLMC until the death of its founder–leader, MHM Ashraff in 2000.

### 3. Traditional Image of Muslim Politics in Sri Lanka

As a moderate and harmonious community, the political conduct of Sri Lankan Muslims has historically been identified as neutral compared with other ethnic minorities (Aliff and Sarjoon 2010). The cordial political relationship maintained with the Sinhalese (the ethnic majority of the country) paved the way for the Muslim community to experience privileges and political patronage, and to hold higher positions, such as ministers, ambassadors, militia members, arbitrators, medical experts, and business partners in the socio-economic and political spheres under the Sinhalese kingdoms. Even during the post-independence era, Muslims continued their traditional role in politics vis-à-vis the Sinhalese and the Tamils (Phadnis 1979).

Until the mid-1980s, Sri Lankan Muslims had no “ethnic” political parties of their own. Muslims sought and obtained membership and achieved positions of influence in all major national political parties, in particular within the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) (Ahmad 2012). The earliest or first generation of popular Muslim leaders in Sri Lanka, which included Sir Rasik Fareed, T.B. Jayah and Dr. M.C.M. Kaleel, rose to political influence with the political and moral support of the Sinhalese constituencies. This influence continued to the second generation, with personalities such as Dr. Badi-ud-din-Mahmud, M.H. Mohamed, A.C.S. Hameed, Jabir A. Cader, and Imtiyas Bakkir Makkar, who were elected mostly by considerable numbers of Sinhalese voters and were influential Muslim political leaders in national politics. Even after the formation of a distinct Muslim political party, the SLMC, the majority of southern Muslims’ political orientations followed the same route. These Muslims and their leaders felt that their socio-cultural interests and political representation would be better protected if they aligned with the Sinhalese majority. This argument has enabled them to win elections in constituencies where the community did not have decisive strength (Ahmad 2012). At the same time, Muslims in the north-eastern region had aligned politically with major Sinhalese and Tamil parties such as the UNP, SLFP, Federal Party (FP), All Ceylon Tamil Congress, and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Popular Muslim politicians such as M.S. Kariapper, M.M. Mustaffa, M. Abdul Majeed, and A.R.M. Mansoor, started their political careers with pro-Tamil and pro-Sinhalese political parties, and they rarely considered establishing a political party for Muslims (see Phadnis 1979; Knoerzer 1998; Aliff and Sarjoon 2010; Ahmad 2012; Imtiyaz 2013). The earlier generation of Tamil political leaders advocated for the rights and concerns of the Muslim community as fellow Tamil-speakers. Therefore, north-eastern Muslim leaders found it comfortable to be involved in politics and represent the community through major pro-Tamil parties. The formation of a Muslim political party, such as the All Ceylon Muslim United Front by M.S. Kariapper in Kalmunai,

was considered an abortive attempt, because its candidates failed in the elections and the party did not have a social base to mobilize the Muslims (Ahmad 2012).

Muslims in Sri Lanka's post-independence era were given prominent positions, such as cabinet ministers, head of legislature (speaker), provincial governors, ambassadors, and mayors within national, regional, and local political structures, despite their number in the population and the parliament. Since 1947, every cabinet accommodated at least one Muslim; the UNP government that lasted from 1977 to 1994 generally had more Muslims. Many popular Muslim political leaders who extended their influence on national politics in the post-independence era were mostly elected from pro-Sinhalese and pro-Tamil political parties. As a result, they were loyal mostly to the parties they represented and did not voice the concerns and grievances of the Muslim community. On a number of occasions where the Sinhalese governments were unconcerned and unjust toward the Muslim community, Muslim leaders and representatives on the government side could not oppose or express their support for Muslims. The traditional alliance of Muslims and their leaders with majority parties gave the Muslim community representation, portfolios and even political positions nationally and internationally, but it did not give them a common political identity, voice, and force. Mohan (Mohan 1987) found that the continued association of Muslims with the UNP from 1947 to 1956 was neither rewarding nor in the interest of the community at large.

However, with the intensity of ethnic conflict and civil war from the early-1980s, ethnic politics also became influential in social life. Both major ethnic groups sharpened their political vision along ethnic and religious lines, causing the Muslim community of the north-eastern region to be practically vulnerable and politically voiceless. On the one hand, the UNP government headed by JR Jeyawardena attempted to forge diplomatic relations with anti-Muslim forces, such as the Israeli government, to the utter dismay of the Muslims (Ayub 2016). On the other hand, Tamil liberation groups, mainly the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), had been violently targeting innocent Muslims in the north-eastern region suspecting them of being supporters of the pro-Sinhalese governments (see Mohideen 2002; International Crisis Group (ICG) 2007; Yusoff et al. 2014a). Also, Ashraff found Muslim ministers and politicians to be helpless because of their strong affiliation with the pro-Sinhalese parties and governments. Such a vulnerability at the hands of Tamil militant nationalists and the marginalization by the government authorities encouraged many eastern Muslims to support the politics of the SLMC. Ashraff had a powerful presence in this context when he declared the SLMC as a political party in 1986.

#### **4. Ashraff's Political Entry, the Formation of the SLMC, and Related Influence on Muslim Politics**

Ashraff was born on 23rd October, 1948 in a Muslim village called Sammanthurai in the then Batticaloa district (now in Amparai district) in the eastern province. He grew up in the town of Kalmunai, in the same region. After schooling in Kalmunai, Ashraff entered Law College where he passed his examinations with first class honors (Jeyaraj 2000). While practicing law, Ashraff began his political career, like many eastern Muslim leaders, as an admirer of the Tamil father figure S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the founder-leader of the FP. He spoke on FP platforms and in 1976 attended the historic Vaddukkoddai conference, where the newly formed TULF unanimously adopted the demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. In 1977, Ashraff was the driving force behind the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), a political organization formed under the leadership of M.I.M. Mohideen. He signed an electoral coalition agreement with Appapillai Amirthalingam, the leader of the TULF, which paved the way for MULF candidates to contest the elections under the TULF symbol on a separate Tamil state platform. Ashraff did not contest the 1977 general election, but he actively campaigned. The highlight of Ashraff's speeches then was his public pronouncement that even if Amirthalingam himself could not turn Tamil Eelam into reality, Ashraff would do so (Jeyaraj 2016). While the Tamil candidates of the TULF swept the polls, no Muslim from the party won a seat in the polls. Also, the MULF made an electoral alliance with the TULF in the District Development Council (DDC) elections held in 1981. With the lesson learnt from the failure of the 1977 general election and

the 1981 DDC election, particularly in the Amparai district, Ashraff sharpened his political vision, separating it from Tamil politics and basing it on his own community. Ashraff parted ways with the TULF in 1980 and the MULF entered a state of decay.

The anti-Tamil pogroms intensified in the beginning of the 1980s and the consequent escalation of armed Tamil militancy led to a situation where Muslims became increasingly insecure and apprehensive of their future in a proposed "Tamil state." Also, there were anti-Muslim pogroms sponsored by the government. All these resulted in a pathetic situation in the north-eastern region where Muslims became vulnerable. Outbreaks of violence between the Tamils and the Muslims throughout the eastern province resulted in divisions and cleavages among the communities, both politically and culturally. Thereafter, the ethnic and identity divisions were put forward in the political process. Mutual suspicions and prejudices also emerged among all communities in the north-eastern region. In due cause, violence and injustice incidents increased in every-day social life (see [Mohideen 1987](#); [Fazil 2005](#); [Sarjoon 2008](#); [Yusoff et al. 2014a](#)). Ashraff too was compelled to shift to Colombo as a victim of violent ethnic confrontation.

The Muslim community, particularly youngsters, were frustrated and ready to mobilize for armed struggle. This pathetic context pushed Ashraff to organize protest demonstrations over the issue affecting Muslims. In fact, he was the one who turned the attention of Muslim youngsters towards the democratic path of politics during the peak of the ethnic conflict and violent civil war in Sri Lanka. All this created a suitable climate for Ashraff and his brand of politics to arrive on the national scene. Ashraff identified the need and yearning of the Muslim community to boldly assert and articulate their identity. As [Ali \(1997\)](#) pointed out, the Tamil-Muslim racial riots of April 1985 in the eastern province added an additional imperative to the formation of the SLMC. Ashraff redefined the objectives of the SLMC and redrafted the constitution so as to make it a national party. He declared the SLMC a Muslim political party in November 1986 at its 6th national convention, and actively advocated for the rights and interests of the Muslim community through the SLMC.

The establishment of the SLMC was a paradigm shift in Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. When the major pro-Sinhala and pro-Tamil political parties failed to protect Muslims' rights, interests, properties and lives, there was a need for a distinct political party to serve as a strong political force to protect the Muslim community. The neglect of Muslim interests by the moderate Tamil leaders and the targeting of Muslims by the radical forces also induced the Muslims to mobilize under a strong and separate political organization ([Sarjoon 2008](#); [Sarjoon 2001](#)). In fact, the emergence of the SLMC was a timely action that Ashraff made to protect the Muslim community, specially the youngsters, from turning to violence and terrorism, or taking up arms to protect them from targeting and marginalization by the two ethnic majorities, the Tamils and Sinhalese, and the armed rebel forces.

On the other hand, the formation of the SLMC resulted in promoting an ethno-religious identity and orientation for the Muslim politics as well. Until the formation of the SLMC, Muslims never connected ethnicity and religious images to their politics, but they were involved in politics under the shadow of pro-Sinhalese and pro-Tamil parties. However, as viewed earlier, ethnic politics, as well as the marginalization and victimization of Muslims resulted in the provision of a space for Muslims to conceptualize ethnic and religious politics and to mobilize the public on those bases. The opposition expressed by Tamil rebel groups to the formation of the SLMC and the activities of its leaders were also clearly justified on the basis of separating Muslims from Tamils. In fact, as [Uyangoda \(2010\)](#) rightly pointed out, Muslims consider themselves a separate ethnic group as against the Tamil community by virtue of their Islamic religious identity. The emergence of a separate ethno-religiously-based political party was a success for the formation of identity politics among Sri Lankan Muslims. This was a clear transformation of Muslim political identity in Sri Lanka.

Similarly, with the formation of the SLMC, Ashraff turned Muslim politics into mass (public) politics that seriously focused on poor voters and their socio-economic wellbeing. Most of the traditional Muslim political leaders had emerged mostly from the western province, particularly as members of the wealthy business community ([Mohan 1987](#)). Therefore, they mostly favored the



economic and social welfare policies of the pro-Sinhalese parties despite the interests and grievances of north-eastern Muslims, who formed one-third of the country's Muslim population, and most of whom were involved in agriculture and fishing. The continued association of Muslims with the UNP during the most of the period up to the 1990s was neither rewarding nor in the interest of the community at large. However, Ashraff advocated for the grievances of the middle class and the ordinary public, and worked for the improvement of their socio-economic conditions. This allowed Ashraff and his party to gain mass popularity among north-eastern Muslims. Since he hailed from a middle class family, Ashraff was able to easily understand the grievances of ordinary people. While the other Muslim representatives only approached the public during elections, Ashraff continued to interact with and speak for them even though he was not elected as their representative and was not in power.

With the formation of the SLMC, Ashraff opened a new era in Sri Lankan Muslim politics. The SLMC rose as the third force in national politics with the capability of influencing the government. It articulated the interests and rights of the Muslim community and spoke against the victimization and marginalization of Muslims caused by ethnic politics, ethnic conflict, and the peace process. The influence and contribution of the SLMC and its founder-leader, MHM Ashraff to Muslim and national politics can be examined under three different themes: the influence and impact on the Muslim political culture, on the socio-economic development of the Muslim community, and on the work apart from ethnic politics for the sake of all and the nation.

#### *4.1. Influence and Impact of the SLMC under MHM Ashraff on the Political Culture of the Muslim Community*

The formation of a district Muslim political party, the SLMC, gave a new image or shape to Sri Lankan Muslim politics. Both the south-western and the north-eastern Muslim leaders viewed the emergence of the SLMC as a competing force to their traditional political activities (Sarjoon 2003). Ashraff labelled his version of politics along ethnic and religious lines. This represented a transformation of Muslim political identity in Sri Lanka (Knoerzer 1998). Until the formation of the SLMC, Sri Lankan Muslims did not have a distinctive identity in politics. There were no successful Muslim political parties based on the ethnic or religious identity of Muslims. Though a few leaders attempted to form Muslim political parties, they failed in attracting public support. However, with the formation of the SLMC and its progressive growth and successes, the SLMC was able to deeply dominate the entirety of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka with ethnic and religious identities. Ashraff was highly promoting identity-based politics by adopting Islamic fundamentals as the guiding principles of his party, and following them. Since Muslims strongly identify themselves with their ethno-religious identity, and had been facing ethno-religious identity challenges during the early stage of the civil war, Ashraff's brand of identity politics attracted much public support.

Traditionally, most of the Muslim political leaders had emerged from the landlords or wealthier autocratic families, or families with strong political backgrounds. However, the SLMC made a change to this tradition by providing charismatic leadership in Muslim politics as well as in the national politics of Sri Lanka. Unlike other Muslim leaders, Ashraff emerged from an ordinary middle class family that had experienced a number of challenges. Since his father was an ordinary government servant—a village headman—he suffered financially throughout the course of his schooling and higher studies. This economic background and the financial suffering he experienced helped him to understand the issues of the poor and vulnerable. This sharpened his leadership qualities that helped him to be a popular leader. Also, he was able to acquire dealership qualities during his school and college days (Sarjoon 2001). When he entered into politics, he received a public welcome and became a popular public leader.

When Ashraff declared the SLMC a political party in 1986, the whole nation turned on his leadership. The charismatic leadership characteristics he expressed and the role he played in voicing the grievances of the Muslim community and internationalizing them earned him the status of a national leader. His parliamentary entry induced a leadership competition between Ashraff and other Muslim ministers and parliamentarians. However, throughout his national political career,

though there were many Muslim cabinet ministers representing the major non-Muslim political parties, and in the government and opposition wings, Ashraff was considered to be the leader of the Sri Lankan Muslim community both nationally and internationally. This indicated the fact that the traditional image of Muslim political leadership shifted from the south-west to the north-east. In fact, as [Ameerdeen \(2006\)](#) has pointed out, the emergence of the SLMC under Ashraff's leadership challenged the established leadership structure among Muslims in Sri Lanka.

The more space given by the two major ethnic groups to ethnic politics resulted in the emergence of radical political movements that resorted to violence as part of the ethnic conflict in the Sri Lankan context. One can argue that the lack of leadership commitment to guide youngsters toward democratic means paved ways for radical and terrorist movements within the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. However, the greater success of the SLMC under its founder-leader, Ashraff, in terms of ethnic politics in Sri Lanka was the turning of frustrated Muslim youngsters onto the democratic path of fulfilling their expectations and rights. Through his charismatic leadership qualities and public discourses, Ashraff was able to attract the thousands of youngsters who were ready to resort to violence in response to the challenges they faced from different sources. By manipulating the negative impact of an armed mobilization, Ashraff indicated to them a democratic path of grievance accommodation. In fact, this not only saved the Muslim community from the violent impact of civil war to a certain level but also avoided bringing the Sri Lankan civil war into more complex tri-polar confrontations.

With the electoral support gained in the successive popular elections at the local, provincial and national levels from 1988 to 1994, the SLMC was able to provide symbolic and meaningful representation to the Muslim community. For the first time, when Muslim representatives were elected to parliament from the SLMC, the whole nation found the SLMC to be the representative institution of the Muslim community within the short period of its emergence. In 1989, the SLMC contested the parliamentary polls and won four seats. Ashraff himself was elected with a massive majority (see [Goonerathne and Karunaratne 1995](#); [Cader 2002](#)). This was the first time a Muslim representative was elected to parliament from a Muslim political party in the history of Sri Lanka. Based on the electoral accord with Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), the SLMC contested under its own symbol in the north-eastern province and on the PA ticket in the other provinces in the 1994 general election. The SLMC won six seats and got another three representations on the national list (one from the SLMC and two from the PA). These nine members represented a distinctive Muslim party that essentially made them the true representatives of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

While there were many Muslim representatives from other parties, Ashraff and the others elected under the SLMC also emerged as the symbolic representatives of Muslims. The whole parliament and the nation turned to the speeches of Ashraff and the SLMC representatives on the basis that they symbolized Muslim representation. Ashraff was recognized as the first Muslim political party leader in the history of the Sri Lankan parliament and was considered as the sole leader of the Muslim community both nationally and internationally. Only the SLMC representatives were able to put forward the issues, grievances and demands of the Muslim community inside and outside the parliament. Ashraff was among the few who received huge criticism and opposition, not only from the representatives of other ethnic groups, but also from the representatives of his own ethnic group. While most of the other Muslim parliamentarians and ministers wanted to articulate the interests of the government or the parties they belonged to, Ashraff and his party members were symbolizing the voices of the whole Muslim community in the country (see Ashraff's parliamentary speeches, [Hakeem n.d.](#)).

Since Muslims were involved in politics with major pro-Sinhalese and pro-Tamil parties, there were no opportunities for Muslims to show their political strength at national politics. However, with the formation of the SLMC, Ashraff made it possible. With the electoral victory reached within a short period, the SLMC became the third political force in national politics. Within one year, after it was recognized as a political party, the SLMC was able to secure the position of being the major opposition party in the merged north-eastern provincial council in 1988, and it gained four seats in the national

parliament in 1989. This indicated that the SLMC had emerged as the third major political force in terms of representation and votes received (see [Goonerathne and Karunaratne 1995](#); [Cader 2002](#)). When the SLMC gained seven seats in the 1994 general elections, it emerged as not only the third major political force but also as the deciding force in forming the central government. Therefore, in 1994, the SLMC rose to the status of “queen-maker” at the national level. This situation continued until the 2004 general election. In all elections from 2000 (2001 and 2004), the SLMC played a constructive role in the country’s national politics, which indicated that it was emerging as the third political force in the country. Ashraff, until he died in September 2000, played a vital role within and outside the PA government as the major coalition partner, and influential cabinet member.

One of the major contributions of the SLMC to the political culture of the Muslim community was that it rose to a position of a strong social and political voice in the discourses of the ethnic conflict and peace process in Sri Lanka. At a time when the conflict in Sri Lanka was perceived in simplistic terms as a “Sinhala versus Tamil issue,” the efforts of the SLMC and Ashraff brought to the fore the problems faced by Muslims in the war-torn region. The eloquent and effective advocacy of the Muslim cause by Ashraff led to a general awareness that the seemingly intractable ethnic crisis was not merely a Sinhala–Tamil bilateral issue, but also a trilateral one involving Muslims ([Jeyaraj 2000](#)).

Since, most of the Muslim leaders and MPs from the major pro-Sinhalese parties were under the control of their party leadership and policies, they were unable to urge the government authorities to accommodate Muslim interests and issues in the ethnic conflict resolution process beyond the interests of those parties. They also could not oppose any government policy that affected the Muslim community. However, Ashraff and his party were able to internationalize the Muslim concerns and issues by pressuring the stakeholders in the ethnic conflict and peace process to understand that the north-eastern Muslims were also affected severely by the country’s ethnic conflict and civil war—therefore, their concerns and grievances should also be accommodated in any peace negotiation and political settlement. The national and international propagation by Ashraff and his party helped in attracting the world’s attention towards the grievances of the north-eastern Muslim community. This urged the Sri Lankan government authorities to consider the Muslims as one of the integral actors in any eventual peace process ([Sarjooon 2001](#)). This also helped include Muslim issues and interests in the rehabilitation and resettlement of civil war victims in the north-eastern region, thus drawing in their concerns in the peace negotiation, particularly after 1994. During the peace negotiation held under the PA government (from 1995–2000), Ashraff played an influential role as a cabinet minister and legal expert. When the peace delegation discussed power-sharing mechanisms to resolve ethnic conflict, his party proposed a territorial autonomous political unit as to politically empower the Muslim community living in the north-eastern region ([Ameerdeen 2006](#)). Importantly, for the first time in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict resolution process, an autonomous power-sharing unit for Muslims was proposed in the draft constitution proposed by the PA government during 1995–2000 ([International Crisis Group \(ICG\) 2007](#)). This was a significant success of the SLMC and Ashraff in influencing the peace delegation to accommodate Muslim interests in the ethnic conflict resolution process in Sri Lanka.

#### *4.2. Influence and Impact on the Improvement of the Socio-Cultural and Economic Conditions of Muslims*

The SLMC under MHM Ashraff’s leadership played a significant role in improving and promoting the socio-cultural and economic development of the Muslim community, particularly of those living in the north-eastern region of Sri Lanka. The north-eastern region was severely affected by the ethnic conflict and civil war, but it was also abandoned in the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development processes. Ashraff and the SLMC representatives, through their alliance with the PA coalition government, bargained for responsible ministerial positions and an allocation of more funds to rebuild the economic and infrastructural facilities of the north-eastern region. In particular, Muslims in this region were severely affected by the civil war, even though they were not active participants in it. During civil war, hundreds of Muslims were killed and thousands of Muslims in the north-eastern region were displaced internally, affecting their properties and livelihoods (see [International Crisis Group](#)



(ICG) 2007; Yusoff et al. 2014a; Sarjoon 2008). For many reasons, including a lack of political voice and support, they were not been accommodated in the rehabilitation and development programs initiated by the government authorities.

When the SLMC became a ruling partner, Ashraff advocated for the compensation of economic losses and initiated a number of development programs to rebuild their socio-economic activities. Therefore, Ashraff bargained for two important ministries: the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, and the Ministry of Ports and Shipping. Although these two ministries were under the charge of political representatives of the eastern province before 1994, they were not able to rehabilitate the war victims successfully and offer job opportunities to the unemployed in the region. Through these ministries, Ashraff was able to create thousands of job opportunities and offered them mostly to Tamil-speaking Muslims and Tamils, as well as the Sinhalese. Similarly, through his ministries, Ashraff was able to resettle thousands of war-affected families, including Muslims and rebuild their livelihoods. It is worth noting that thousands of job opportunities were offered to unemployed Muslims in the ports authority during the Ashraff era. In fact, the years of Ashraff's active politics was a golden era in terms of the socio-cultural, economic and political development of Sri Lankan Muslims.

Ashraff's contribution to the construction of the Oluvil harbor in the Muslim-predominant south-eastern region was important milestone in the development of infrastructure and economy in the region. In fact, the south-eastern region had not been given priority in the process of economic and regional development of post-independence Sri Lanka. No major industries were open except some garment factories during the Premadasa presidency (1989–1993). Therefore, Ashraff bargained to build a harbor in this region, expecting to improve regional and economic development activities in the region. Even though the project was initially criticized by the majority of Muslims of this region as it would lead to the Sinhalaization of the region, Ashraff was very keen on building the harbor as it would lead to massive development in the region. Surveys and feasibility studies were conducted during Ashraff's holding the Ministry of Ports and Shipping. The building of administrative complex, circuit bungalow, a marine-based training center, and a light house—the first one in post-independence Sri Lanka—were completed in 1998 under the guidance of Ashraff. A total of 1000 direct and indirect job opportunities were expected to generate following the completion of the first stages of the project and another 10,000 employment opportunities were forecast by 2015 (Sirimane 2015). In 2008, even though the SLMC had not been with the government, the official inauguration of the harbor project was begun and the construction of a fisheries harbor was completed in 2013 (Yusoff et al. 2016). Though Ashraff or his successor could not fulfill the initial objectives of this harbor project—which was to build a commercial harbor—the harbor project promoted the infrastructure development in the region to a certain extent.

Similarly, the contribution that Ashraff made to the educational development of the Muslim community was also remarkable. While he was in the opposition wing in parliament, through his bargaining power and his cordial relations with the President Premadasa, Ashraff was able to convince the government authorities to establish a College of Education in Addalaichchenai in 1990, a predominantly Muslim village located in the coastal belt of the Amparai district. It was established in order to facilitate the empowerment of Tamil-speaking teachers. This institution has now accommodating hundreds of Muslim and Tamil students preparing for the teaching profession every years. Similarly, through his ministries, Ashraff was able to build, rebuild and improve the necessary facilities in many schools and educational institutions particularly affected by the war or marginalized in development due to the civil war context in the north-eastern region. On the other hand, Ashraff advocated and supported the promotion and the protection of the traditional practices and cultural heritage of the Muslim community by insisting on re-staging them in public and socio-political events. Also, he insisted his followers stage those cultural events in his party's political meetings and conventions. With his effort, a government-sponsored birthday celebration of the Prophet Mohammad (*Meeladun Nabi*) was conducted for the first time in the north-eastern

region in 1997. A number of Islamic cultural programs were staged during this celebration including the awarding of prominent cultural artists and the establishment of the Muslim cultural museum in Addalaichchenai (Sarjoon 2001).

As an advocate who hailed from a poor background, Ashraff experienced severe financial difficulties during his secondary and higher studies. This induced him to work and advocate for the educational improvement of the poor during his political career. When Muslim students were unable to continue their studies in the universities in the north-eastern region due to the civil war, Ashraff sought to establish a new university so as to facilitate their higher education. The South-Eastern University of Sri Lanka was born in this process through the efforts of Ashraff and his loyalty with the PA government. Ashraff advocated for the establishment of a new university in a safe place in the south-eastern region, a predominantly Muslim area. The PA government, headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunge, accepted the demand and established the South Eastern University Collage in 1995 (later upgraded to a full-pledged national university on 15th May 1996), because the demand was viewed as rational and justifiable (Cader 2002; Ameerdeen 2006). At the beginning, a majority of students attending this university were Muslim. However, at present, a considerable amount of Sinhalese and Tamil students also study there and it has been functioning as a national university with flying colors. In the process of institutionalizing and internationalizing the Muslims' issues and grievances, particularly during the peace process, the role played by this university community was remarkable. The Muslim National Revival Conference and the Oluvil Declaration, which insisted on the autonomous rights of Muslims and Muslim nationalism, were some of the remarkable events that took place at the South-Eastern University (see Jeyaraj 2003; Student Union 2003; Yusoff et al. 2014b).

#### *4.3. Work Apart from Ethnic Politics for the Sake of All and the Nation*

The SLMC under Ashraff's leadership also worked apart from ethnic politics so as to empower all ethnic groups and to strengthen unity and social harmony in the country. Even though Ashraff named his party as Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and advocated for the betterment of the Muslim community, from the beginning of his involvement in active politics, his vision attracted a considerable number of members from the other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. As Samaraweera (2015) reveals, Ashraff had a vision of a peaceful, prosperous, united Sri Lanka—a Sri Lanka without violence, oppression or injustice, where all citizens could feel at home, as equal partners in the state and society. It was this vision that led him to create the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Ashraff was deeply committed to the vision of building a just society for all Sri Lankans. It was through this commitment that he became fluent in Tamil, Sinhala and English languages and advocated for the learning and practicing of all these languages as a mechanism to overcome the linguistic problems in the country. While the interests of his own community were paramount for him, Ashraff was also extremely sympathetic to Tamils' problems and grievances. Except where the interests of Tamils and Muslims clashed directly, he tried to help realize the legitimate aspirations of Tamils. He spoke on behalf of the problems of Tamils, the suffering of Sinhalese youth, the difficulties faced by Up-country Tamils, and the issues faced by ordinary Sri Lankans.

Ashraff worked hard towards building a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious Sri Lankan society and state. In fact, this vision motivated him to form a national non-communal political party, the National Unity Alliance (NUA). He was steadfast in finding a configuration that would share state power in a way that was acceptable to all communities and actually solved the grievances of ordinary people—whether it be sharing legislative, executive, administrative or judicial power at the periphery or the center. He was convinced that if Sri Lanka was to move forward, the grievances of all communities and social groups would have to be addressed. According to Ashraff, as long as Sri Lankans allow minorities to feel that their grievances have not been heard, that their grievances have not been remedied, then Sri Lankans will not be able to think of themselves as Sri Lankans and face the national crises that they have been called upon to face (Samaraweera 2015).

Ashraff's political history shows that from the start of his involvement in electoral politics, many non-Muslim candidates were accommodated in the nomination papers in successive elections. His party nominated Asita Perera, a Sinhalese, as its one and only national list member of parliament in 1994. When Ashraff formed the NUA in 1998, with the purpose of uniting all ethnic groups in national politics, it attracted many people from other communities. There were many members from other communities included in the supreme councils (or high commands) of the SLMC and the NUA. In the 2000 general election, Vimalaweera Disanayake, a Sinhalese, was elected as a member of parliament from the Digamadulla district under the NUA ticket. This is testimony to the hard work of Ashraff and the SLMC towards uniting the different communities under the common theme of peaceful Sri Lanka. Furthermore, Ashraff named his party's secretariat as '*Dharussalaam*'—the home of peace—and declared open it for any citizen searching for peace.

Politically and socially, Ashraff maintained a strong and cordial relationship with other community leaders and politicians of all ethnic groups. He had a cordial relationship with the major pro-Sinhalese party, the SLFP (or later the PA) and the UNP. Therefore, most national-level events of the SLMC, such as the annual conference, were always held with the attendance of leaders from the major political parties. While the interests of his own community were paramount to him, Ashraff was also extremely sympathetic to the Tamil problems and grievances. At the same time, Ashraff was able to maintain a strong and special relationship with the major pro-Tamil parties, the TULF and with the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC). He even concluded political agreements with these parties, such as the Ashraff–Thondaman and Ashraff–Chandrika Agreements (Sarjoon 2001).

The SLMC and Ashraff advocated and worked for the equal development of all communities. For this purpose, when Ashraff allied with the PA government in 1994, using the ministries' funds, he was able to rebuild all sectors of affected people, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations. The reconstruction of Digawapi *Viharaya*, a popular religious worship site in Sinhalese history, located in the Muslim-dominated south-eastern region was one of the landmark development initiatives of the SLMC's founder-leader, Ashraff. He was also able to allocate a considerable amount of money for the reconstruction of religious places and public utilities for the other ethnic groups, too. Further, his ministry initiated a project of constructing 'resettled model villages' in which all communities were accommodated. He also maintained an equitable ethnic ratio to accommodate all groups when he provided job opportunities under his ministries. All this justified that though he established a party under his community's label, he worked for the betterment of all communities and to build unity and harmony among them.

## 5. Discussion of the Nature of Ashraff's Leadership and His Version of Muslim Politics

With the formation of the first ever successful Muslim political party, and leading it to a number of political successes, MHM Ashraff played a decisive role in Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. Through his leadership qualities, the decisions he made on crucial points immensely contributed to the development of the Muslim community and their politics. However, during his entire political career, Ashraff received criticism and opposition from different angles unexpectedly. Apart from his political enemies from other ethnic groups, he also faced criticism and opposition from his own community and party loyalties. Most of this criticism and opposition was centered on his leadership qualities, his vision of politics, and his political actions. His political activities were labelled by the ethnic majorities as ethno-centric and promoting ethnic divisions among different groups. In spite of many blaming Ashraff for forming a communal political party, as Ayub (2016) rightly pointed out, the SLMC was not formed with a view to gain narrow political outcomes. Circumstances compelled its formation, especially since Tamil armed groups, particularly the LTTE, brutally treated Muslims in the north-eastern region, while the government of the day as well as the main opposition had let them down.

It is worth noting that Ashraff was voicing the concerns and grievances of Muslims and advocated for their rights and privileges. However, he was not a pioneer in promoting ethnic and religious

politics in Sri Lanka. From the early period of independence, both the Sinhalese and the Tamils had formed political parties and movements based on ethnic lines and promoted ethnic and religious politics. By promoting the prominence of Sinhala culture and Buddhism in the country's political system, both major national parties—the UNP and the SLFP—represented the majority of the Sinhalese. Therefore, the leaders of these two parties were the pioneers in this regard. Similarly, the Tamils also formed parties along ethnic lines, namely the Tamil Arasuk Kachchi (Tamil State Party or Federal Party) and the Tamilar Viduthalai Kooddani. These parties were advocates of the interests of the major ethnic group supporting them. Ashraff may have been the pioneer in forming a successful Muslim political party. Advocating the interests of his own community was paramount for him. However, Ashraff was also extremely sympathetic to the problems and grievances of the Tamils and Sinhalese affected by the war and government policies. Except where the interests of Tamils and Muslims clashed directly, he tried to help realize their legitimate aspirations. Also, he immensely helped the Sinhalese community, particularly those living in the eastern province. This brought his party the Sinhalese's electoral support in many elections, particularly after his sudden demise.

Ashraff was also criticized for his autocratic leadership, especially vis-à-vis his party's affairs. He was the supreme leader and brooked no nonsense from within. His politics were clearly a one-man show with no clear successor to follow him. As [Farook \(2014\)](#) reveals, from the very inception, the SLMC was a one-man show. Within years, Ashraff built up an image of a leader who was unpredictable due to his alignment with different political forces. As a result, Ashraff was accused of widespread corruption and moral degradation. A number of people who supported him began to leave the party and take distance from him. Most of the party loyalists who criticized and opposed his decisions and commands were suspended from the positions they held and the membership of the party. Even at the time of his death, he had suspended the party membership of three MPs and sent a show-cause letter to another ([Jeyaraj 2000](#)). However, he justified his decisions in order to make his party stronger and more united. It was true that although Ashraff suspended many of the prominent figures and founding-members of the party, they were not able to challenge Ashraff, who helmed the growth and strength of the SLMC in both Muslim and national politics. Also, they were not able to form and run a successful Muslim political party. Today, when noticing the splits and fragmentations within the SLMC with the absence of Ashraff, many would agree that the autocratic decisions taken by Ashraff were for the sake of the party and the community. However, unfortunately, this autocratic leadership role taken by Ashraff, on the other hand, failed to unite and strengthen his party leaders and loyalties after his demise. Although there were a number of wings and structures within the party, his dominance had not allowed for a second-tier leadership that could have led the party after his demise. His successors have failed to follow many of his progressive ideas. Ashraff seriously urged unity within party and never promoted women to public politics while he was actively involved in politics. However, immediately after his demise, his followers breached his rules and formed two alliances as well as allowing his wife into politics. This can be seen as one of the greater failures of his leadership.

On the other hand, even though Ashraff followed a unique path in politics through forming a district Muslim political party, one could also argue that he had followed the path of many Muslim leaders (see [Farook 2014](#)). Many Muslim leaders, though they were elected or selected from opposition parties, were later shifted to the government and held portfolios and other government positions. They advocated this shift or cross-over for the sake of the Muslim community. This nature of Muslim leadership received criticism and opposition from many sides. Similarly, Ashraff's support for the ruling parties was also justified in that he was also following the path of earlier Muslim leaders by forming alliances with major parties and successive central governments. It was true that Ashraff, while being in the opposition, was supporting President Premadasa of the UNP government from 1989 to 1993. Similarly, the same Ashraff who seriously criticized the leadership of the SLFP, Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike during the 1988–1989 elections, formed an alliance with her daughter and a coalition government while Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike headed the government (Prime Minister)

from 1994–2000. This indicates that Ashraff had also followed the same policy of supporting any party coming to power, justifying it as being for the sake of the community—a policy mostly followed by many Muslim leaders.

However, it is worth noting that while he supported the government or helped to form government, Ashraff achieved much for the sake of the Muslim community and other minorities as well. In order to support the presidential candidate Premadasa in 1989, he set forth a condition to reduce the cut-off vote of 12 percent to five percent in the proportional representative voting system. This was fulfilled through the 15th Amendment in the constitution made just a few days before the presidential election in 1989. Also, while supporting President Premadasa, Ashraff was able to initiate many development plans in the eastern province for the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the public. Similarly, his alliance with the PA government greatly contributed to the Muslim community, as well as others living in the north-eastern region, as can be viewed in section four of this paper. Many political leaders, regardless of party affiliation, agree that Ashraff's coalition politics with the major national parties is different from that of other Muslim leaders that mainly focused on societal interests rather personal or party benefits.

On the other hand, Ashraff was criticized for not having a clear vision for a political settlement scheme for the north-eastern Muslims. Ashraff was an active supporter of Tamil Eelam before he formed a separate Muslim political party. However, after his active involvement in politics through the SLMC, he demanded an autonomous political unit for Muslims in the north-eastern region through the merging of all Muslim majority areas on a non-contiguous basis. The concept was not his own, but rather borrowed from the MULF which initially proposed it (Mohideen 2002; Cegu Issadeen 2006; Yusoff et al. 2014b). The concept of a Muslim-majority political autonomous unit emerged in the context of proposing to merge the eastern province with the northern province as a mechanism to accommodate the autonomous interest of the Tamils. This was fulfilled with the introduction of the provincial council system through the Indo-Lanka Accord and the thirteenth amendment to the constitution in 1987. While opposing the Indo-Lanka accord and the provincial council system it established, Ashraff decided that his party should contest the north-eastern provincial council held in 1988, arguing that it would be best to secure and protect the Muslims' representation.

However, when the PA government initiated peace negotiations to find a lasting political solution to the ethnic conflict through sharing powers among the regions and regionally-concentrated ethnic groups, Ashraff proposed a more eastern-based autonomous unit for Muslims. During the peace negotiations, when the PA government proposed a Muslim-majority 'south-eastern regional council' to accommodate the autonomy concern of Muslims, Ashraff and his party loyalists supported it through publishing a pamphlet under the patronage of his party (see Fousar 1997). When this peace negotiation and political settlement process became failure, at the last stage of his political career, Ashraff advocated the establishment of a Kalmunai administrative district in the south-eastern region, which continues to be a major demand of the SLMC in the post-Ashraff era (see Yusoff et al. 2014b; Yusoff and Sarjoon 2016). However, Ashraff was poorly involved in the political advocacy process of Kalmunai administrative district while he was in active politics, though there were rooms to achieve it with his politics of bargaining (Yusoff and Sarjoon 2016). This uncertain position of Ashraff on his vision of political settlement for Muslims was highly criticized by different actors. It is worth noting that the changing context in the ethnic conflict and civil war and their impact on the Muslim community, together with the reality of political settlement for Muslims and their changing aspirations in the eastern province may have influenced Ashraff's decisions in choosing a different vision of a political power-sharing arrangement for Muslims in the ethnic conflict resolution process.

By those opposing and criticizing his political career, Ashraff was accused of providing jobs to Muslims on a massive scale through the institutions such as harbors that came under the purview of his ministries. Likewise, he was faulted for giving priority to Muslim areas in the matter of rehabilitation projects. A tempestuous feud between Ashraff and another Muslim Minister, Fowzie of the PA, saw sparks fly at regular intervals. This led to Ashraff throwing political tantrums at every



turn and threatening to resign. In fact, before Ashraff formed a coalition government with the PA and took on a ministerial post, though there were many ministers, the Muslims' position in many sectors were low. In particular, the port and shipping sectors were entirely dominated by the Sinhalese. This was the justification of Ashraff for providing more jobs for Muslims and Tamils in these sectors. Since this was accepted by the cabinet, nobody prevented the appointments. Similarly, although Tamils and Muslims were severely affected by the civil war through internal displacement, loss of lives, injuries, loss of livelihood and property, they were not properly compensated, rehabilitated or resettled. Therefore, through his ministries, Ashraff allocated much to the recovery, relief and reconstruction of these communities. It is true that the north-eastern region, and particularly the eastern region, was empowered with necessary basic and infrastructure facilities mainly after 1994—after the SLMC formed a coalition government with the PA.

As seen above, Ashraff was an influential leader in the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka and contributed immensely to the Muslim community. After he died, many Muslim political parties were formed and many of their leaders continue to assert that they are following the path of Ashraff and are the true successors. However, the influence of Ashraff in Muslim politics, particularly in the SLMC, is still debatable or questionable. Many of his decisions and policies were not followed by the leaders of his party or other Muslim parties after his death. To cite some examples: until his last minutes, he highly emphasized the strengthening of unity among party loyalists and members. Unfortunately, immediately after his death, the party loyalists split into two groups that led to many divisions and splits within the party. Also, until Ashraff was in active politics, he never promoted women into public politics, but immediately after he died, his followers took his wife into active politics and appointed her as one of the co-leaders of the party. This was highly criticized on the basis of Islamic principles and as opposed to the political view of the founder of the party. Also, Ashraff was always of the view that as long as Ranil Wickramasinge continued to lead the UNP, the SLMC would not make any alliance with that party. However, after his death, SLMC leaders formed an alliance with the UNP on a number of occasions and took part in its cabinets. Also, at the last moment of his last journey, Ashraff's statement breaking the party's relationship with the PA was issued on a National Unity Alliance (NUA) letterhead said that following the PA's General Secretary D.M. Jayaratne's announcement that the NUA was not a constituent of the PA, "From today, neither the NUA nor the SLMC will have anything to do with the PA." It further said that Ashraff had already directed his candidates not to use President Chandrika Kumaratunga's photograph in their propaganda materials ([The Island 2000](#)). However, immediately after he died, his successors agreed to form a coalition government with the PA.

Similarly, Ashraff, at the inaugural meeting of the SLMC, on 26th November 1986, requested his community not to form a second Muslim party ([Ayub 2016](#)). However, his followers, within few years of his death formed many Muslim political parties opposing each other. All these post-Ashraff developments within the SLMC and Muslim politics indicate the nature of commitments and courage in following Ashraff's thoughts, commands, decisions, and his leadership qualities by his followers and loyalties. This can be interpreted as the greater failure of Ashraff's leadership in post-Ashraff Muslim politics.

It is obvious that divisions and differences in opinion would be vital when a great and incomparable leader met his demise unexpectedly. This was evidenced with the SLMC when its founder-leader Ashraff died unexpectedly. It is worth noting that the Sinhala political leadership was often blackmailed and let down by the SLMC, who exploited the leadership crisis after Ashraff's death by pitting one group against another. Although Ashraff has left a number of thoughts and guidances to his followers such as strengthening unity and obeying the leader, to be followed in crisis situations, unfortunately, they rarely followed them and allowed or promoted divisions, regionalism, and self-promotion. Although Muslim politics in the post-Ashraff era became so fragmented, the thoughts and leadership qualities of Ashraff continue to be remembered.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The formation of the SLMC in the peak of Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, civil war and ethnic politics made a remarkable shift in the political culture of Muslims in Sri Lanka. The SLMC, the first ever successful political party on an ethno-religious basis for Muslims was formed based on the leadership qualities offered by its founder-leader, MHM Ashraff. In the context of severe ethnic conflict and civil war, and the absence of an ethnically-based political party, the Muslim community, particularly those living in the north-eastern region, were highly vulnerable in terms of meaningful political representation and political voice. Ashraff gave a timely leadership and voice to this vulnerable community by forming the SLMC and advocating the rights and privileges of the Muslim community. He was instrumental in the transformation of the traditional image of Muslim politics, which was characterized as feudalist and leader-centered, into one that was more people-centered. Also, his contributions to the socio-cultural, economic and political development of the Muslim community are also widely honored. Ashraff's vision of politics and action was labeled as unique in terms of making decisions and advocating for the rights and interests of the Muslim community compared to other Muslims leaders. Ashraff used the power of the Muslims' vote to the fullest, switching allegiances back and forth to gain concessions for his constituents. Ashraff offered strong and coherent leadership to the SLMC and the Muslim community at large.

As usual for many successful political figures, however, Ashraff too received much criticism and opposition from different angles, including from his own community. He was accused of promoting ethnic and religious politics and working for the promotion of Muslims' interests. However, as examined in this paper, the history of his active political career proves that though he was the pioneer in forming a successful Muslim political party and advocating for the rights and grievances of the Muslim community, he was also extremely sympathetic to the problems and grievances of the Tamils and Sinhalese and worked towards the promotion of their interests as well. Also, he worked towards strengthening unity and lasting peace in the country while working with Tamil and Sinhalese leaders. His political leadership and the political movement, the SLMC, still continue to influence Muslim as well as national politics in Sri Lanka. His followers and critics can find leadership qualities and political judgment in the path and actions of Ashraff if they analyze it from the historical and ethnic perspectives of politics in Sri Lanka.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript.

ACTC	All Ceylon Tamil Congress
CWC	Ceylon Workers' Congress
DDC	District Development Council
FP	Federal Party
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MULF	Muslim United Liberation Front
NUA	National Unity Alliance
PA	People's Alliance
PR	Proportional Representative
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNP	United National Party

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