

Sri Lanka: The true face of 'One Country, One Law'

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Throughout history, attractive branding and policy names have been used to veil heinous atrocities. The Cambodian genocide was committed in the name of creating a 'self-sufficient agrarian socialism'. The 'extermination' of the Jews in Germany, and later, occupied Europe, was planned in the name of a 'final solution to the Jewish question' by the Nazis. In 1972, the Ugandan Dictator Idi Amin ethnically cleansed tens of thousands of his country's Indian origin minority community in the name of 'Africanisation'.

In many ways, the appointment of the racist monk Galagodaththe Gnanasara – a convicted felon – to lead a Presidential Task Force that will assess legal drafts for compliance with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's own One Country, One Law policy should not come as a surprise. The current President has long since embraced ethnonationalism in the name of political expediency. Gnanasara Thero is the embodiment of ethno-religious nationalism and a deeply polarising figure, willing to use violence to bring about Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony in the country. The President and the BBS monk have always been fellow travellers – in fact when President Rajapaksa was elected in 2019, the BBS declared "mission accomplished" and announced it was disbanding its hate-mongering operation that had terrorised the country's Muslim community since 2012.

One Country, One Law means different things to different people. In a casual reading, it appears to mean quite simply that the law must be applicable to all citizens equally. In essence, upholding the rule of law. Which would mean that those exposed by the Pandora Papers will be investigated like any fraudster, convicted killers Sunil Ratnayake and Duminda Silva would have to serve out their life sentences without hope of political pardon, or that COVID-19 restrictions would apply to all citizens, irrespective of social class or affluence, but the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration's One Country, One Law policy has nothing to do with the rule of law. Since it first originated during the 2019 SLPP Presidential campaign, it has only been about asserting Sinhala-Buddhist legal hegemony. The planned proposals to ban the burqa, shut down madrasas or Islamic schools, and the recent cattle-slaughter ban are all part of a basket of legal reforms designed and planned to subjugate and oppress Sri Lanka's Muslim minorities.

The Task Force, led by Gnanasara Thero, therefore must be seen and opposed for what it truly embodies. It is an ethnonationalist dog whistle against the Muslim community (with the Tamils and the Christians thrown in for good measure). There is no question that Muslim marriage laws require the broadest possible reform – indeed calls for this change are loudest from Muslim women in Sri Lanka. For instance, simple amendments to Article 16 (1) and 80 (3) of the current Constitution could allow judicial review of existing legislation, which would bring the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) in line with fundamental rights guaranteed to all citizens.

But surely – and this is elementary – Gnanasara Thero is not the legal reformer a rational government would choose to lead this process. The monk is an avowed hater of Muslims; he has made a living and built a reputation on attacking Muslims and other religious minorities and filling

the Sinhalese people with fear, hatred and mistrust of their fellow citizens. His role model is Ashin Wirathu, the Burmese monk dubbed the “face of Buddhist terror” because of his anti-Muslim, nationalist rhetoric that has precipitated horrific violence against the country’s Rohingya community and driven hundreds of thousands of Burmese Muslims into exile.

The Government’s short-sighted, callous decision to appoint a task force with the BBS General Secretary at its helm, and a BBS Media Secretary thrown in for good measure, speaks volumes about its true intent. Small wonder, the appointment has sparked outrage and terrified Sri Lanka’s minority communities.

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