

Press Release

## The Anti-Muslim Sri Lankan Regime Intensifies its Campaign of Islamophobia by Announcing the Closure of over 1000 Muslim Schools and the Banning of the Burqa

Having already defiled the sanctity of hundreds of deceased bodies of Muslims through its mandatory Covid cremation policy, the ultra-nationalistic anti-Muslim Sri Lankan regime led by Gotabhaya Rajapakse, unveiled its latest style of marginalising and stigmatising Muslims in the country by announcing plans to shut more than 1000 Madrassahs and ban Muslim women from wearing the Burqa which it ludicrously labelled as a "sign of religious extremism". These madrassahs simply teach the Qur'an, Arabic and core Islamic beliefs, and many of them have existed for decades in the island, having posed absolutely no harm nor threat to the country. However, on the 13<sup>th</sup> March, Minister for Public Security, Sarath Weerasekera, announced that these Islamic schools would be closed since they contradict national education policy, while the defence ministry sought to demonise the Muslim students of these schools and their teachers through the spurious allegation that the Madrassahs teach separatism and Islamic fundamentalist ideas...but failed to provide an ounce of evidence for these wild claims. Meanwhile, the regime absurdly used the bogus argument of 'national security' to justify its xenophobic ban on Muslim women covering their faces for religious purposes, while simultaneously mandating the whole population to wear face masks while in public due to the Covid pandemic! All this is simply the continuing saga of a regime that is exploiting and fueling anti-Muslim hatred in order to curry favour with influential ultra-nationalistic Sinhala Buddhist monks, businessmen and voters who supported and funded its path to power through inciting Islamophobia within the country. Furthermore, the regime's draconian Prevention of Terror Law provides it wide-ranging powers to deal aggressively with anyone that falls into its politically motivated definition of "religious extremism", including detaining suspects for 2 years for what it deceptively terms "deradicalization" purposes. Clearly, the government aims to use the legislation to pass a raft of laws against Islam under the false pretext of preventing extremism. For example, on the 10<sup>th</sup> March, Sri Lanka's Public Defence Minister announced that the government would ban the non-violent Islamic political party Hizb ut Tahrir and arrest its key members, falsely accusing it of being an extremist movement and threat to the country. This is despite the group having never engaged in a single act of violence as it is a contradiction to its Islamic method for change.

Furthermore, it does not go unnoticed that these recent announcements against Muslims come at a time when the Sri Lankan regime is in the midst of a massive economic crisis due to the devastating fallout of the pandemic, as well as reeling from a huge corruption sugar scandal which is believed to have lost the country a revenue of over Rs.16 billion. These recent fearmongering policies against Muslims therefore serve as a convenient deflection and distraction smokescreen to divert public attention away from the country's economic woes and the fraudulent dealings of the political elite. However, this political trickery fools no-one except those blinded by ultranationalistic Buddhist agendas! Additionally, the Rajapaksa government is following the well-trodden path of other secular and communist autocratic and Muslim-hating regimes as in India, China and France by cynically playing the 'extremist' card to try and terrorise Muslims into abandoning core Islamic beliefs and practices. This ratcheting up of the manufactured 'extremism' threat level in the country is also a ploy that provides Rajapakse, Sri Lanka's former defence chief, a cover for his backdoor militarization of state institutions.

This dangerous strategy of playing politics with national security; sowing and exploiting the seeds of religious hatred; pitching communities against one another; and inciting fear and division for political gain serves the interests of no-one, except the ruling elite who have ridden into power on the back of these inflammatory and poisonous tactics. We call the Muslims of Sri Lanka to stand firm to their Islamic beliefs at this testing time. And we call the Ulema and others of influence in the country to raise their voices against this injustice and attempts to divide communities through the creation of imaginary enemies and threats. Allah (swt) says: ﴿يُنَبِّئُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِالْقَوْلِ الثَّابِتِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ﴾ "Allah keeps firm those who believe, with the word that stands firm, in this world and in the Hereafter." [Ibrahim: 27].

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