



NARRATIVE WATCH

Key Online Narratives Shaping
Sri Lanka's Public Discourse

This report analyses a key online narrative shaping Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. Using trend monitoring, keyword analysis, and observations of influential pages and channels, it explores how digital conversations emerge, spread, and influence public opinion. As social media increasingly drives civic and political discourse, understanding these narratives is vital for promoting informed engagement, countering harmful content, and strengthening inclusive dialogue in Sri Lanka.

Guest contributors include Darshatha Gamage and Mandana Ismail Abeywickrema.

NARRATIVE PERIOD

10th to 15th October 2025

KEY THEME

The appointment of Mohamed Munir as the deputy Minister for Religious Affairs and Cultural

BACKGROUND

The government of Sri Lanka announced that there would be a reshuffle in some ministerial portfolios. Among the multiple changes that were made, the public discourse online was attracted by one particular appointment. MP. M.M. Mohamad Muneer who was previously Deputy Minister of National Integration was appointed as the Deputy Minister of Religious and Cultural Affairs. Interestingly MP. Gamagedara Dissanayake has held the role of 'Deputy Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs' since November 2024 and the 'Buddhasasana' portfolio has not been given to Muneer who is a Muslim and also an Mawlavi.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Following the announcement of the new ministerial portfolios on 10 October 2025, significant discussion was observed on social media regarding the appointments. Among these, the appointment of MP Mohamad Muneer attracted particular attention, especially within Sinhala Buddhist online spaces.

A series of misleading posts and narratives circulated on social media claiming that MP Muneer had been appointed as the Deputy Minister responsible for *Buddha Shasana* (Buddhist Affairs). These claims were amplified by several popular Facebook pages and social media influencers with substantial followings. The posts gained high engagement, contributing to widespread misinformation.

Prominent nationalist and religious figures such as Ven. Galabodaaththe Gnanasara, Ven. Balangoda Kassapa, and the Chief Incumbent of Mihintale Rajamaha Vihara, Ven. Walawahengunawewe Dhammarathana Thera, made provocative public statements regarding the appointment. Some of these statements also alleged that there was no longer a Ministry of Buddha Shasana in Sri Lanka, further reinforcing confusion and distrust among followers.

There were also efforts to suggest that Muneer is the head or owner of multiple controversial madrasas and has actively worked to propagate islamist extremism.



FIG 1: A post which was widely circulated that 'congratulates the newly appointed Deputy Minister for 'Buddha Shasana', Mohamed Muneer,' which is misleading.

Additionally, attempts were made to cast doubt on the religious identity of MP Hiniduma Sunil Senevi, the Minister of Buddha Shasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs. Several posts falsely claimed that he was of Christian faith. However, MP Senevi has publicly identified as a Buddhist and is recognised as a Sinhala language scholar. No credible evidence supports claims about his alleged Christian background.

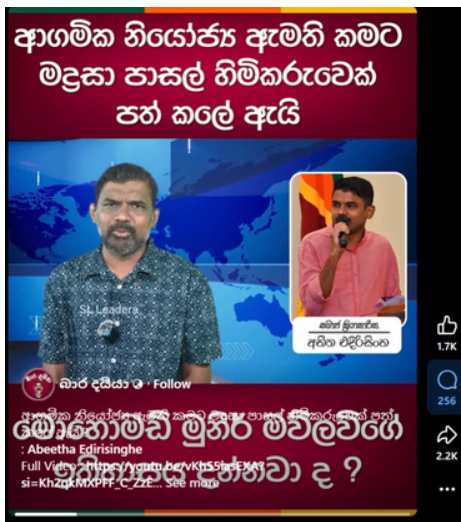


FIG 2: The screenshot is from a video that circulated on facebook extracted from a video from YouTube that suggest Muneer is an islamic extremist and owner of multiple Madrasas.



FIG 3: Post-portraying images of Minister Hiniduma Sunil Senevi and Deputy Minister Muneer stating that they hold the portfolios of 'Buddha Shasana'.

The Opposition Leader’s statement in Thanthirimale, asserting that “we should not be ashamed to establish a Buddha Shasana Ministry in Sri Lanka,” appeared to further legitimise and feed into the misleading narrative advanced by nationalist actors.

It was also observed that most of these narratives were likely mobilized through organized efforts. Patterns suggest that there was potential coordinated inauthentic behaviour which was utilized to amplify the narrative.

These included posts, images, videos and captions that utilized the same material but were shared by multiple sources repeatedly within a short span of time. These included a satirical post thanking the president as well as a video of a person during the ‘aragalaya’ protests suggesting that person is Mohamed Muneer.

Ishanka Siriwardane · Follow
 10 October at 11:20 · 🌐

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FIG 4: Post by popular political influencers stating that there is no ministry on 'Budhdha Shasana'.

Chamith Liyanaarachchi · Follow
 11 October at 09:55 · 🌐

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31 comments 56 shares

FIG 5: This is from a video that was circulated of a person protesting during the 'Aragalaya' insulting the former president Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The caption suggests that this is Muneer.

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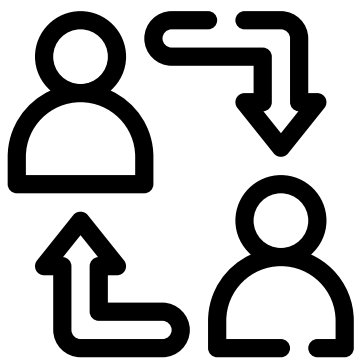
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— ගම්පහ කැවි —

FIG 6: This image here ironically thanking the president for the appointment of Muneer as the deputy minister for 'Budhdha Shasana' was used by more than 20 users

POTENTIAL IMPACT

These narratives are likely to reinforce harmful stereotypes targeting both the Muslim community and the government. Similar narratives portraying religious and ethnic minorities, as well as ‘NGO/ Foreign-funded’ activists, as threats to the ‘Sinhala Buddhist’ identity were observed during previous election periods. Such rhetoric has the potential to escalate into incitement against religious minorities, particularly during times of heightened tension or crisis.



RESPONSE

While the government did not issue an official statement addressing these narratives, Deputy Minister Muneer later gave a media interview clarifying the false claims regarding his portfolio. Supporters of the National People's Power (NPP) also engaged online to correct misinformation and verify his actual role. Fact Crescendo published fact checks providing verified details about the appointment as well as verifying misleading content.

Despite these clarifications, a significant volume of misleading content and hate speech related to this narrative continues to circulate on social media, particularly on Facebook, highlighting ongoing challenges in countering misinformation and hate speech in politically sensitive contexts.

POLITICAL TAKE

The continuity of harmful online content being widely posted and shared on social media is a clear indication of the increasing sensitivity over ethno-religious and the underlying tensions that surface on digital platforms from time to time.

Following the end of the civil war, Sri Lanka has continuously grappled with ethno-religious tensions fueled by ultra-nationalist elements led mainly by the political camp led by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (MR) and his progeny. The Sinhalese nationalist movement raised its head under the MR regime (2005-2015) and elements that later defected from this group also continued to push the majority narrative polarizing the Sinhala Buddhist majority and the ethnic minorities.

In the aftermath of the civil war, these polarizing sentiments were driven by the ultra-nationalists targeting the Muslim community in the country. Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist groups have identified Muslims as a threat to their culture and demographics. One of the main nationalist groups to spew hateful statements targeting Muslims was the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) which was later followed by several other similar organizations. These schemes also resulted in two riots between Sinhalese and Muslims in 2013 in Aluthgama and 2018 in Digana. However, the spread of anti-Muslim sentiments reached a peak in 2019 with a mob attack targeting Muslims following the Easter Sunday attacks where the multiple suicide bombings were carried out by a group of extremist Islamic fundamentalists.

It is this underlying tension fueled by the ultra-nationalist groups, especially the MR-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), that were defeated at last year's national elections that have yet again posted and shared disinformation and hateful comments targeting the newly appointed deputy minister along with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP) government.

This time around, the disinformation campaign has also received the support of other opposition parties including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and supporters of former President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Since the ascension of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) and his JVP/NPP government into office, there is a unified anti-government campaign by what seems as a joint-opposition front, although such a coalition is yet to be officially formed. Hence, even the latest disinformation and hate campaign carried out online on the appointment of a Muslim deputy minister of religious and cultural affairs was led by the ultra-nationalist elements in the SLPP and included members of other opposition parties as well.

Analyzing the reason for President AKD and the JVP/NPP government to appoint a Muslim for the portfolio of religious and cultural affairs follows criticism faced last year by the ruling party over its failure to include a member of the Muslim community to the Cabinet of Ministers. While there is a Tamil representation in the Cabinet of Ministers, the lack of Muslim representation was seen as an oversight, deliberate or otherwise, by the government. Given the large support-base enjoyed by the ruling party among the Muslim community and the concerns expressed by them directly with members of the government, the JVP/NPP seniors, especially members of the steering committee that engages in providing policy directives to the government, held discussions on the sentiments expressed by the party's Muslim supporters. It is in such a backdrop that the ruling party had given special attention to appointing a Muslim as the deputy minister religious and cultural affairs while also appointing another Muslim as the deputy energy minister.