



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.

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NARRATIVE PERIOD

25th to 30th October 2025

KEY THEME

Social media discourse about dresses of Muslim women related to the uniforms of Nurses and athlete Shafiya Yamick.

BACKGROUND

The dress code of Muslim women has been a topic of discussion on Sri Lankan social media at different time intervals. There have been demands on banning the Abaya/ Niqab during anti-Muslim tensions in 2010 - 2020 period. The discourse on the dress codes of Muslim Nurses re-emerged based on a statement made by Vijitha Herath, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism at a meeting with representatives of the Muslim community. The minister stated that there is no legal barrier to introduce a dress/ uniform that suits religious requirements for Muslim women. In the same time, Safiya Yamick, Sri Lanka - Muslim athlete won a triple gold at the South Asian Athletic Championship 2025. An intersection of the two narratives emerged when the netizens began to compare dress codes for Muslim nurses and the athletic kit of Ms. Yamick.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The statement made by Minister Herath attracted widespread attention on social media. The news facilitated much discourse on the uniforms of nurses but also on the dress codes of muslim women. Interestingly, it should be noted that the statement by the minister was that there are no legal barriers to introduce dress/uniform that suits the religious requirements for Muslim women. However, popular news outlets used the headline stating 'Permission is granted for a religiously appropriate uniform for Muslim women'.



Fig 1: Screenshot of the news published on Facebook by Hiru News stating that 'Permission is granted for a religiously appropriate uniform for Muslim women'

The discourse emerged on multiple fronts. Most of it was led by Sinhala speaking men. One of the arguments was that the uniform for nurses must follow a strict standard and should not be changed to the whims and fancies of religious groups. The request was also rejected by audiences on the basis that either female Muslim nurses have not made the request and that there were no women at the meeting with the Minister.

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FIG 2: Screenshot of a post on Facebook that argues that Muslim nurses have not made such a request and this is an effort to propagate the male dominance of Muslim men.

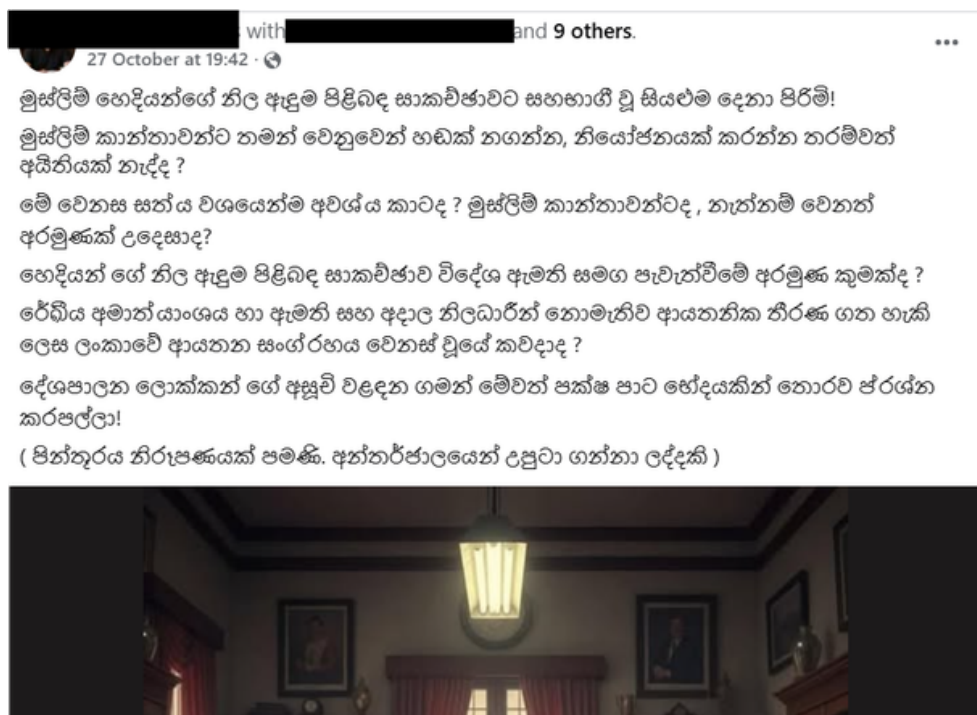


FIG 3: The screenshot argues that all participants at the discussion on the uniform were men and questions the real reasons for the demand.

Part of the discourse also took a direct ethno-nationalist perspective as some social media users suggested that sinhalese are often discriminated against while Muslims are not. Further some argued that the uniform is a standard and if someone is not able to follow the particular standard they should not be in the profession. There were further arguments that people from other racial and ethnic groups might request their own uniforms such as a 'lama saree' by the Buddhists and 'Keteriya' axe by the Adhivasi community. Further there was criticism targeting the government by stating that the government is weak and suggesting it is facilitating the demands of religious minorities.



FIG 4: A post that argues that the uniform is a standard and it should not be changed to demands of different groups.



FIG 5: The post is published by a profile named 'A country destroyed by hatred' and states that 'This is a weak government'. The image in the screenshot targets to highlight the Islamic symbols.

The 'one country - one law' argument that was prevalent a few years ago also emerged with this narrative. Politician and religious figure Baththaramulle Seelarathna's statements on the discourse on the uniforms for female Muslim nurses, suggested that there should only be one law for all ethnic groups. If not, Sinhalese nurses should wear 'lama saree, osaree', and Tamil nurses' should wear 'Saree'. He also called Vijitha Herath as a 'Marakkala' suggesting he has become a Muslim in another statement. He also states that if anyone wants to follow the Muslim law, they should be sent to a Muslim country.



FIG 6: Screenshot of a video statement by Battaramulle Seelarathna stating that 'If Muslim nurses are wearing the Burka, Sinhalese wear 'Lama Saree' and Tamil should wear 'Saree'. 'Apilage Sadhu' is fighting for one law.

There were also post suggesting that this is part of a growing Islamic effort to capture power and those in other ethnic and religious groups will have to unite to form a government in Sri Lanka.

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Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism Minister Vijitha Herath has assured that there are no legal barriers preventing Muslim nurses from adhering to their religious dress requirements while serving in government hospitals.

More on this story: <https://www.dailymirror.lk/.../No-legal.../108-323228> ✓

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FIG 7: The post states that in the next 5 to 10 years, NPP or another party will have to form a government with those from other religions (Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Atheists and the limited Jews) and suppress the extreme Muslim power. Further population growth of Muslims must be restricted similar to China.

Interestingly athlete Safiya Yamick was caught on to the discourse as she competed in the national athletic kit when she won her triple gold medals. One of the arguments was that even if she was muslim she did not run in a Burka and similarly the uniforms of nurses should not be changed based on ethnicity.



FIG 8: A caption of a post connecting the kit of Ms. Yamick and the uniform of Nurses.
'Even if she was muslim she did not run in a Burka. She competed in the sports costume. Similarly the uniforms of nurses should not be changed based on ethnicity

Ironically it was also observed that Safiya Yamick also received criticism for her athletic kit from the Muslim community itself. It was observed in multiple comments which suggested that the athletic kit was not appropriate for a Muslim woman. Multiple comments could be observed mostly in Tamil that were misogynistic and demanded the as a Muslim she should not wear that kit.



FIG 9: The comment states 'She ran wearing an underwear and arm cut t-shirt with a white thread in her hand. This is proud for the country but disrespectful for the religion'. The white thread refers to the "Pirith Thread" which is a holy thread tied by Buddhists.

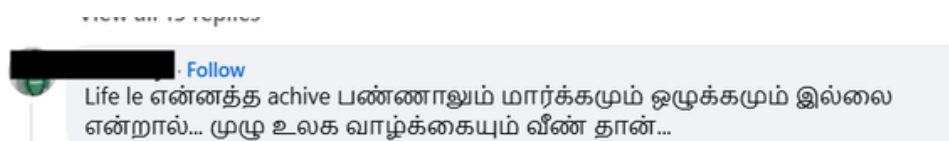


FIG 10: A comment targeting Safiya Yamick states 'No matter what you achieve in life, if you do not have religion and morality, the whole worldly life is in vain.'



மேல போனதுக்கு அப்புறம் தான் தெரியும் எது மேல என்று

FIG 11: Another comment found on Facebook states, 'You only know what's best after you've gone to the afterlife'. It refers to Islamic belief after one's passing where it is said that the people are tested for what they did during their time on Earth..

These comments also received a lot of backlash and hate which in some ways defended Safiya Yamick but they also transpired hate towards the wider muslim community. These also draw inferences from existing stereotypes such as growing Muslim population and threat to the Sinhalese.



It's easier to win an Olympic medal than to live with this kind of mindset



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FIG 12: The comment by a Sinhalese states 'From the comments we can see that if they behave in this way with a small population, if they are the majority we will have to stay according to their way'.

POTENTIAL IMPACT

It is evident that the biggest impact of this discourse is for Muslim women. Their participation in professional and other activities are constrained due to the social norms that exist and mostly reinforced by men as seen by the social media engagement. These narratives also reinforce societal stereotypes that fuel the nationalist Islamophobic narratives and could potentially help maintain tension between the communities and could erupt at a major incident in the future.

RESPONSE

In response to the circulating narratives, the Minister of Public Administration, Provincial Councils and Local Governments, Prof. A.H.M.H. Abayarathna, stated that the Ministry has not received any official requests nor issued any recommendations to change the uniform of female Muslim nurses.

At the same time, several counter-narratives emerged, arguing that Muslim women should be allowed to wear uniforms that maintain required professional standards while also respecting their religious practices. Examples from other countries where similar accommodations are made were also highlighted to support this view. Additionally, broader discussions surfaced regarding the need to make nurses' uniforms in general more comfortable and practical. Some commenters further emphasized that female nurses themselves should be included in these conversations, noting that decisions about their attire should not be made solely by groups of men.

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The social media discourse over the attire of Muslim nurses as well as on the Muslim female athlete that resulted in the dissemination of online mis/disinformation and on some occasions hate speech indicates, yet again, that ultra-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist groups continue to propagate organized campaigns against ethnic minorities, especially Muslims. There have been sporadic campaigns, online and offline, targeting the Muslim community. In some instances, these campaigns have led to violence like during the 2013 Aluthgama violence, 2018 Digana riots and the 2019 campaigns and attacks on Muslims following the Easter Sunday attacks.

While the Tamil community faced targeted campaigns by ultra-nationalist groups during the over 30-year old civil war in Sri Lanka, the post-war period has witnessed an increase in mis/disinformation campaigns and hate speech, mostly on online platforms, targeting the Muslim community.

Sri Lanka's ethno-religious dynamics show that the majority of the population in Sri Lanka practices Buddhism, followed by Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity as well as a few other minority religions. A majority of the Buddhists are Sinhalese, which forms the largest ethnic group in the country and the Tamil community is the country's largest ethnic minority and includes both Hindus and Christians, while Muslims constitute a distinct ethnic group who practice Islam and primarily speak Tamil.

Given this dynamic, appeasing the Sinhala-Buddhist majority plays a key role in wresting power at national-level elections. Until the 2024 presidential election, it is the right wing that also includes the center-right wing that have held power in the country while the leftist and center-leftist movements have also been in several governments since independence through alliances with the center-right groups. However, with the civil war reaching a peak and the center-right wing pushing to explore a peaceful resolution to the war through peace talks, the 2005 presidential election became one of the most decisive elections Sri Lanka had faced. The center-right wing was represented by former President Ranil Wickremesinghe (RW) and the center-left wing was represented by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (MR).

Due to the decisive nature of the elections, the MR campaign based its campaign on nationalism and addressed mainly to the Sinhala-Buddhist majority while the RW campaign addressed the moderate Sinhala-Buddhist voter with more concentration on the minority votes. Finally, a boycott of the election imposed by the LTTE in Northern Province, MR defeated RW to become President. MR's victory was seen as a victory of the nationalists and some elements involved in the campaign, carved out an ultra-nationalist group out of it.

Since then, the ultra-nationalist groups have from time to time used targeted campaigns against ethnic minorities, especially the Muslim

3. <https://www.themorning.lk/articles/hwRHR4aBji8k9lDpe1Ks>

community with the aim of instilling suspicion among communities, creating communal disharmony and ensuring the ultra-nationalist bloc remains intact.

Be that as it may, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's (AKD's) ascension to power in 2024 through the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP) by splitting a major portion of the Sinhala Buddhist majority while also winning the North and East Provinces predominantly led by minority communities, became the first real political hit for the ultra-nationalist camp. President AKD's victory at the presidential election and the JVP/NPP victory at the preceding parliamentary elections with a two-thirds plus majority in parliament, shocked both the right wing and the ultra-nationalists.

Therefore, since 2024, there is once again a push to incite ethnic disharmony through various means online and offline by ultra nationalist groups. There is a targeted campaign to breakaway the nationalist voters from the JVP/NPP camp by portraying the government as being more favorable to ethnic minorities while ignoring the sentiments of the ethnic majority as well as cultural sensitivities. There are also continuing campaigns in the North and East Provinces over disputes over Hindu places of religious worship and Sinhala Buddhist places of religious worship. While there are online mis/disinformation campaigns around these incidents, it is evident that there is a growing as well as greater underlying political current behind these campaigns.

Even young political leaders in the opposition most often promote themselves as Sinhala Buddhist leaders. Some senior center-right wing political leaders are also courting the nationalists due to the belief that whoever holds a majority of the nationalist votes would win at the next election. This great political race however indicates the thin line between ethnic harmony and hate when subject to manipulation by ultra-nationalist groups through targeted campaigns against ethnic minorities.