

COMMUNITARIAN POLITICS AND POLITICAL ASCENDANCIES: A CASE STUDY OF INDIAN MUSLIM LEAGUE

SIHABUDEEN P.^{1a}

^aResearch Scholar, Department of Political Sciences, University of Hyderabad, Telangana, INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to trace the nature of communitarian politics in Kerala, with a focus on how the Indian Union Muslim League (also known as Muslim League), has employed diverse religious and political strategies to create a 'political space' for the Muslim community in the state. The paper explores the significance of the party's engagement with the political structure by being part of governments within the frame of a secular democratic order to achieve its communitarian goal and thus establish political ascendancies from time to time. Muslim League's negotiations with electoral politics in order to achieve political power and enhance their stake in the formulations of policies, especially for the Muslim community, are explored in this paper. This paper also examines Muslim League's contribution to ending the 'political alienation' experienced by Muslims in the immediate aftermath of independence and enhancing the political consciousness of the community.

KEY WORDS: *Community, Religion, Identity, Politics, Power, Muslim League.*

INTRODUCTION

The political identity of Muslims has been a contested topic within the history of colonial and postcolonial India. The patent role played by religion in the creation of two independent nation-states—India and Pakistan—defined within the binaries of 'secular' and 'religious' nationalism, has problematized the very existence of Muslims within India. Their religious and political identity, and loyalty towards the Indian nation is always questioned by the dominant religious group, which delegitimized the political articulations Muslims. As against the narratives mentioned above, this paper focuses on the Kerala unit of Indian Union Muslim League, a religion-based community political party, which was formed out of the post-partition political trauma on 10th March 1948, to protect the interests of the Muslim community in Kerala. Despite sticking to its religious identity, Muslim League has been able to create a 'political space' for the development Muslim community by holding political power of the state through various electoral alliances.

It needs to be pointed out at the outset that there is, indeed, a difference between Islamism/political Islam and 'Muslim politics' (by which I mean religious and community politics). Political Islam entails a political ideology by articulating the idea of the necessity of establishing an Islamic government. Here, the separation of *din* (religion) from *dawla* (state) is not possible because of which political

Islam, based on *Sharia* (Islamic Law), cannot operate in the realm of secular politics (Hefner 2011: 167; Ismail 2011). Muslim politics, on the other hand, operates within the realm of secular politics, with Muslims as actors of community politics occupying different positions in the social settings which they live. Muslim politics does not engage in the construction of Muslim selves in a uniform manner as Islamist do. Its engagement with identity construction is informed by the power struggles that are embedded in the material, local conditions and global processes, and it makes use of a multiplicity of registers and frames of reference (Ismail 2011: 16- 28). For the actors of political Islam, religion is a matter of identity, based on religious faith whereas for the actors of Muslim politics, it is a personal or contextual choice. One must understand these two premises according to the contextual settings of politics and society (Eickelman and Piscatory 1996; Esposito and Voll 1996; Hasan 2007; Bayat 2013).

COMMUNITARIAN POLITICS IN KERALA

Religious and caste-based identities remain the bedrock of social and individual life in India. The relationship between the religion and politics on the one hand, and communal interaction between different religious identities – particularly between Hindus and Muslims – on the other, have been one of the central themes of scholarly literature in India (Kothari 1970; Brass 2003; Jaffrelot 2010). Although,

there are different arguments and theories on these, 'communalism' is the larger structure within which these issues have been framed. As George Mathew argues, "two subtle distinctions of communalism can be drawn up: (a) communalism as a political doctrine; and (b) communalism as a behavior based on community sentiments" (Mathew 1989: 11). The former implies the tendency to use the religion-cultural differences to mobilize people for narrow political ends, and the latter aspect of communalism entails a certain identity being transferred into a sense of community feeling (ibid). To summarize, the first definition is based on the identity politics and the latter is more associated with the politics of identity, or community politics.

In the context of Kerala, the community relations got substantial attention from scholars, and most of them acknowledge that communalism is very close to the second definition of community politics (Mathew 1989; Oommen 1995; Varshney 2002). Mathew analyzes how the basic identities and primordial loyalties in which the religious factor is common, play a sustaining role in social movements and how it eventually lead Kerala into secular and developmental processes (Mathew 1989). The community politics is being stable in Kerala since the formation of the state, where the Muslims and Christians are active political minorities with their political parties such as Muslim League and Kerala Congress, while majority communities such as Nayar and Ezhava also have their stake in the governments. According to Devika and Varghese, it is widely acknowledged that in the early and mid- 20th century Malayali society, 'communalism' was referred not as fierce hatred and violence between communities, but as intense competition around rights and resources within the field of modern politics and centered upon the state (Devika and Varghese 2010: 7). This unique societal characteristic of Kerala helped to produce a sustainable achievement of the different socio-religious groups in maintaining their dynamic presence in the contemporary socio-political scenario.

MUSLIM LEAGUE AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Indian Union Muslim League was formed as a community political party mainly for the socio-political development of the Muslim community. In the context of the post-independence period, most of the Muslim political and religious organizations in North India either dissolved or joined with Indian National Congress (henceforth Congress). Many of the All India Muslim League (AIML) branches in different parts of North India had disbanded as they feared it would invite the label of communalism. The *Jamiat-ul-Ulama Hind*, a strong traditional Muslim organization

extended their political support to Congress (Wright 1966). *Jamaat-e-Islami Hind*, on the other, advocated for a separate system of government and did not accept the secular parliamentary institutions of the country in the initial stages of their development. Yoginder Sikand observe the conditions of the Muslims of North India; wherein most of the middle class had to migrate to Pakistan due to partition. "The majority of the Muslims who remained behind were poor, mainly from the lower strata. Being accused, rightly or wrongly, of being responsible for the Partition, they faced constant anti-Muslim pogroms, pervasive discrimination and the growing menace of Hindutva chauvinism. The north Indian Muslims were too afraid to mobilize politically as a strong force since they felt that this would invite charges of being 'communal' or 'anti-national'. Hence, lacking a strong independent political identity, the Muslims of north India were either politically divided or weakened" (Sikand 2007). Contrary to this, Muslim League in South India, under the leadership of Muhammed Ismail (1896- 1972), the first president of the party, strategically adopted another method to form their own distinct political party and try to extract the benefit of power by joining the coalition government for the welfare of the Muslim community (Wright 1966; Hasan 1988, 1990).

The formation of Muslim League in Kerala minimized the 'communal' tag over the party through their constant democratic political activities. It has successfully promoted a political consciousness among the Muslim community in Kerala in the turbulent situation of the post-partition scenario. The party employs its political power and policies within the frame of secular democratic order with an object of achieving the constitutional rights of Muslims, other backward and minority people of India. Muslim League could uphold the sacredness of diversity of Indian life with the motto of 'secularism and communal harmony'. This mission is responsible for helping the Muslim League occupy a high political position in the democratic system of the state (Muslim League Website; Aziz 1992; Thangal, Vadakara & Rasheed 2013). Yoginder Sikan noted that different political parties in Kerala mobilize the Muslims politically as a strong, effective force. Being taken seriously by various political parties, they were able to get many of the demands of the community met. While in north India, Muslim politics have been dominated by symbolic, although not unimportant, issues such as Babri Masjid demolition, Urdu language, Muslim Personal Law and so on. While in Kerala Muslim political discourse has been very different, focusing more on developmental process of the community (Sikand 2007). As Miller rightly points, political mobilization under Muslim

League produced a new sense of power, security feeling and confidence to the community from the turbulent political situations faced by them in the post-independence India (Miller 2015: 167- 71).

The community political strategies of Muslim League were formulated in a way that, despite severe intra-religious ideological indifferences, they have been successful within their limitations in organizing different Muslim segments such as 'traditional' Sunnis and 'reformist' Mujahids (Miller 1992; Osella and Osella 2007; Salah 2013) under a common political platform for a very long time. This political unity of them is mainly rooted in the concept of *Umma*, for the larger community, social and political, interest. Here both of these groups act as a pressure group on Muslim League to access the material benefit for their own community enhancement. To achieve these material aids for the community, Muslim League always negotiate with electoral politics in order to achieve political power and to enhance their stake in the policy formulations.

POWER POLITICS AND POLICY FORMULATION

The birth of Kerala state on 1st November 1956, through the merging of Travancore and Cochin states into Malabar, helped Muslim League to act as the best bargaining political power in Kerala. In the year 1957, the first Communist Government was formed under the leadership of E.M.S. Namboothiripad, the first democratically elected government in the world, where the Muslim League sat in the position of opposition along with Congress and Praja Socialist Party (PSP). Due to the internal civil and political disturbance, the term of first Communist Government was cut short by two years owing to Liberation Struggle, a joint struggle of political parties such as Congress, PSP, and Muslim League with the support of different community organizations such as Nayar, Christian and Muslims (Aziz 1992: 49- 60). After the Liberation Struggle, Muslim League was recognized as a major deciding political force of the state by mainstream parties.

The Muslim League negotiates with mainstream electoral politics and its stakeholders, like other political parties, to hold the political power to formulate policies for the benefit of the community and larger public of the state. I. K. Khan notes that Muslim League survived in Kerala because of a communal balance peculiar to state, pioneered the strategy between two closely matched coalitions, centring on the Congress party and Communists (Khan 2006: 349). In 1967, the Muslim League allied with Communist Party of India Marxist CPI (M), the old enemy of Liberation Struggle

and the party was rewarded with a cabinet berth in the E. M. S. led government (1967- 1969). C.H. Muhammed Koya (1927-1983) became the Education Minister of that government and K. Avukader Kutty Naha took charge of Panchayath and Social Welfare Department. This term witnessed many laudable educational and cultural developments in Kerala in general and Muslim community of Malabar region in particular. Firstly, Muslim League was successful in establishing Calicut University, on 22nd July 1968 at Tenchikalamin Malappuram district, a Muslim majority and most backward region in Kerala in terms of education and employment. The opponents dubbed this move as an act of establishing a 'Pakistan University' as it was located in Malappuram (Aziz 1992: 79). As V.R. Krishna Iyer rightly pointed out, 'the Calicut University was rightly well- conceived as an educational resource in a backward region but projected in its infant years with the images of Muslim philistinism and fanaticism. Or so it was thought by Hindus' (Iyer: 2013- 40). However, the political pressure of the party on the government made the dream a reality.

The second was the formation of Malappuram district, a Muslim majority district in Kerala. The need for a separate district was raised officially by the Muslim League MLA P. Abdul Majeed in the 1960s by citing mainly the economic backwardness of two taluks such as Eranad and Valluvanad (Aziz 1982: 82). The resolution for Malappuram district was politically declared by the party during their state conference held at Calicut on 1968 (Basheer 2015). The Muslim demographic nature of the district led to intense debates and agitations at national and state level, where each side accused the other of communalism and partisanship. On the one hand Congress and few Communist Revolutionaries vehemently opposed the move. On the other, Muslim League and Communist party stood strongly in favour during the Legislative debates (Proceedings, Vol. XXIII, No. 20; 1821-5). Outside the Assembly, Jana Sangh along with RSS and Hindu Mahasabha on one side, Congress on the other also started a severe communal campaign against this move. On sixth March 1969, Jana Sangh conducted anti- Moplastan Day in Trivandrum which was inaugurated by the National President, A.B. Vajpayee. Hethen sharpened the criticism by saying that, "the formation of Malappuram district is against the idea of national integration and Indianness and also urged people to unite against the district in full strength". (Basheer 2015: 62). Meanwhile, K. Kelappan, a veteran Congress leader, joined with the Jana Sangh by accusing Mappilas are in relation with Pakistan. He extended his accusation by saying that this act motives the forced religious conversions. His presence along with Jana Sangh made the story of

national importance, and many protests took place in Bombay and Delhi against Malappuram. The district was also tagged as Moplastan or Pakistan (Basheer 2015: 61-74). However, the Communist Government of E.M.S. supported the formation of Malappuram District after long deliberations, and discussions in the Assembly. The official declaration was issued on 7th June 1969, bringing the district into existence on 16th June, by carving out the portions of existing Calicut and Palakkad districts (Aziz 1992: 83; Basheer 2015).

Apart from these achievements of E. M. S. Government, C.H. Muhammed Koya had adopted many laudable measures for the benefit of students and teachers. School education and Secondary education were made free. Arabic and Sanskrit colleges were affiliated to universities, and permanent language posting was given for teachers in Schools and Colleges. Another important policy initiative was the direct payment of salaries for College teachers from government treasuries. Muslim League also succeeded in reserving 10 percent of a government job for the community in Kerala. (Aziz 1992: 75-83; Miller 1992). It is worthy to note that the main aim of the first generation leaders of Muslim League was education, representation and power for the development of ideal society, and they always stood for the 'honorable existence' of the community (Kabeer 1988).

In the successive government in 1969, Muslim League shared power with Communist Party of India (CPI) led by C. Achutha Menon, in which Muslim League claimed the Home Minister and Panchayati Raj institution. After that, Karunakaran- led ministry sworn in on the 23rd of March 1977 in which Muslim League was represented by three posts such as Education Minister, Local Bodies Minister and Assembly Speaker. Due to some internal rifts in the Congress, C. H Muhammed Koya became the Chief Minister of the state, though for a short period, from 12th October to 1st December 1979. He is the only Muslim Chief Minister of the state since then. From 1979 onwards Muslim League became the key political partner of Congress-led alliance, United Democratic Front (UDF).

Steven Wilkinson argues that, "politicians in government will increase the supply of protection to minorities when either of two conditions apply: when minorities are an important part of their party's current support base, or the support base of one of their coalition partners in a coalition government; or when the overall electoral system in a state is so competitive – in terms of the effective number of parties – that there is therefore a high probability that the governing party will have to negotiate or form coalitions with minority supported parties in the future,

despite its own preferences". (Wilkinson 2004: 6- 7). If this is not the case, the politicians and the government either restrict or undermine the minorities. It is evident that the governmental support to minorities, both Muslims and Christians, in Kerala is a part of a strong vote bank and their constant presence in the public sphere of the state.

In the sixty years of Kerala Assembly, Muslim League was a stakeholder in the Government for more than three decades. From the year 1991, 2001, 2011 Congress-led governments, Muslim League had its fair shares in the portfolios such as Industries, Education, Public Works Department and Panchayati Raj etc, in which sixty percent of the revenue of the state was under the Muslim League. The Education portfolio was with League for many years, from the period of C. H. Muhammed Koya onwards and it has resulted in the overall educational progress of Muslim community along with other marginalised groups, particularly in the Malabar region (Thangal 2010; Rasheed 2008; Thangal et al., 2103). It is noteworthy that the major Universities in the state, Agricultural University (1971), Cochin University of Science and Technology (1971), Sanskrit University (1993) and Malayalam University (2012) were initiated by the effort of the education ministers of Muslim League. In the last Congress led Government, 2011- 16, the Education Minister of Muslim League also introduced Government Colleges in all the 140 constituencies of the state. The Government constituted the Minority Commission and Minority Finance Corporation in the year 2013 due to the pressure of Muslim League.

From 1952 onwards, Muslim League has been representing Malappuram continuously in Lok Sabha. Except in 1952 and 2004, every term Muslim League elected two members to the Parliament from the Malappuram district, wherein 1952 it fielded only one candidate, and in the year 2004 the party candidate from Manjeri constituency lost to the CPIM candidate. In the last two United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments at the Center led by Congress, Muslim League claimed the Ministership, which shows the political importance of Muslim League both in the Center and the State.

MUSLIM POLITICS IN THE POST-1990'S OF KERALA

In the late 1980s, more specifically, after the Mandal Commission Report of 1989 and the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 by Hindutva forces, Muslim League witnessed for a series of political outburst within the community. Furthermore, the effects of globalization and the

transnational interaction also mediate the construction of new identity consciousness throughout the world which, one way or the other, has also affected the Muslim politics of the state. As Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatory point that the advancing levels of education, the greater permeability of political borders and the rise of new communication technologies have contributed to the emergence of public sphere throughout the Muslims/world. As a result of this, the common man posed challenges to authoritarianism, the fragmentation of religious, political authority and increasingly opened discussions of the issue related to the 'common good' and aspiration to the more open societies. On the other hand, these developments only reinforce entrenched views and heighten fears of religious and ethnic 'others' (Eickelman and Piscatory 2004).

The emergence of new Muslim political parties in Kerala should be read in the multiplicities of the specific context both international and national levels. The formation of Indian National League (INL) was mainly due to the internal issues within the party. The splinter group accuse Muslim League's reluctance to quit the Congress-led government both at the Center and State in a burning time of Babri Masjid issue. The Muslim political parties such as People's Democratic Party (PDP), Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), and Welfare Party supported by *Jamaat-e-Islami Hind*, were formed either to challenge the existing system or to overcome the stigma of religious and ethnic othering. Despite religious and community identities all these parties have tried to incorporate multidimensional issues such as Dalit's, Minority, community assistance programmes and environmental and so on to maintain a broader framework of community politics, and to protect their secular space. These parties have justified their formation on the basis that Muslim League does not act in the interest of the Muslim community; instead, they act as the political tool of Congress and some wealthy sections of the community. The gradual developments of the new intra-religious political organizations have produced different forms of 'Muslim political identity choices' and challenged the political space of Muslim League, and particularly its moderate political minority identity which had been crucial in preventing the outburst of communalism in Kerala. However, none of these political groups could evolve as crucial bargaining force in Kerala politics as Muslim League, which has successfully wielded their political power in the last seventy years.

CONCLUSION

As a result of their political activities over the last sixty years, Muslim League in Kerala has been acknowledged

as a secular political front garnering support not just from the Muslim community but other sections of the Kerala society as well. The party has strategically made political alliance with the Communist as well as Congress parties to hold state power which it saw as a means to formulate and implement policies for the benefit of the community. As a political party, Muslim League adopts a moderate political language which makes it distinct from the newly emerged political formations which has the Muslim community as their constituency. The party saw the educational development of the Muslim community as one of its primary objectives as education is linked to social mobility and cultural capital. The political progression of Muslim League in Kerala construes two political statements. Firstly, Muslim League has ended the 'political alienation' of Muslims in Kerala in the immediate aftermath of independence and transformed them into a politically conscious community. Secondly, the party played a significant role in mobilizing the Muslim community and transformed them from an interest group to a pressure group in the state.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Aziz, M. (1992). *Rise of Muslims in Kerala Politics*. Trivandrum, CBH Publications.
- Ahammed, Kabeer, T. A. (1988). *Ceeyechinte Lekhanangal (Writings of C.H. Muhammed Koya)*. Calicut, Haritha Books.
- Basheer, T. P. M. (2015). *Malappuram District: Origin and Evolution (Malappuram District: Piraviyum Prayanavum)*. Malappuram, Grace Educational Association.
- Brass, R. Paul (2005). *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*. Washington, University of Washington Press.
- Bayat, Asef. (2013). *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Eickelman, Dale F. and James Piscatori. (1996). *Muslim Politics*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Esposito, John L. and John Voll. (1996). *Islam and Democracy*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Devika, J and V. J. Varghese. (2010). "To Survive or to Flourish? Minority Rights and Syrian Christian Community Assertion in 20th Century Travancore/Kerala". *Centre for Development Studies Working Paper*. 427: 1- 53.

- Ismail Salwa. (2011). "Being Muslim: Islam, Islamism and identity politics". *Political Islam: A Critical Reader*, edited by Frederic Volpi. New York: Routledge.
- Hasan, Mushirul. (April 1988). "Indian Muslims since Independence: In Search of Integration and Identity". *Third World Quarterly*, 10/2: 818-842.
- Hasan, Mushirul. (Aug- Sep, 1990). "Adjustment and Accommodation: Indian Muslims after Partition". *Social Scientist*, 10-8/9: 48-65.
- Hasan, Zoya. (2007). *Democracy in Muslim Societies: The Asian Experience*. New Delhi: Sage Publication.
- Hefner, W. Robert. (2011). "Public Islam and the Problem of Democratization". *Political Islam: A Critical Reader*, edited by Frederic Volpi. New York: Routledge.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. (2007). *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Proceedings of Kerala Legislative Assembly (1969). Vol. XXIII, No.20: 1821-5.
- Khan, I. K. (2006). *Islam in Modern Asia*. New Delhi: MD Publication Pvt.
- Kothari, Rajani. (2004). *Caste in Indian Politics*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- Mathew, George. (1989). *Communal Road to a Secular Kerala*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Miller, E. Roland. (1992). *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study of Islamic Trends*. Madras: Orient Longman.
- Krishna Iyer, V. R. (2013). *C. H. Muhammed Koya*. Edited and compiled by C. H. Muhammed Koya Memorial Publication Committee. Calicut: Calicut University.
- Oommen, John. (1995). "Politics of Communalism in Kerala". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 30/ 11: 544-547.
- Osella, Filippo, and Carolin Osella. (November 2008). "Islamism and Reformism in Kerala, South India". *Modern Asian Studies* 42, 2/3: 317- 46.
- P. A. Rasheed. (2008). *Selected Articles of Raheem Mecheri*. Malappuram: Kerala Muslim Cultural Centre.
- Punathil, Salah. (2013). "Kerala Muslims and Shifting Notions of Religion in the Public Sphere". *South Asian Research* 33 (1): 1- 20.
- Sikand, Yoginder. (30th Jun. 2007). "Muslims in Kerala and Elsewhere: Accounting for the Difference". *Islamic Islamic Research Foundation International*.
- Thangal, M. I. (2010). *Minority Politics: Vision and Mission (Nyuna Paksha Rashtreeyam: Darshanavum Douthyavum)*. Malappuram: Grace Books Educational Association.
- Thangal, M. I., M. C. Vadakara & P. A. Rasheed. (2013). *Indian Union Muslim League Documents 1948-1970 (Muslim League Rekhakal)*. Malappuram: Grace Books Educational Association.
- Varshny, Asutosh. (2002). *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, Theodore. P. (1966). "The Muslim League in South India since Independence: A Study in Minority Group Political Strategies". *The American Political Science Review*. 60: 579- 99.
- <http://iuml.com/history>. An Official Website of Muslim League.