AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL IMPACTS OF ESTABLISHING THE KALMUNAI ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT ON THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the political impacts of establishing the Kalmunai administrative district on the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. The demand for the Kalmunai administrative district has been at a societal level for the last 50 years but has only received political importance from 2000 onwards. However, the Muslims' efforts to achieve the proposed administrative district have been met with extreme oppositions and criticisms expressed by other ethnic groups and certain major political parties. This scenario justifies an analytical study of the nature and extent of the political impacts of the proposed district on the Muslim community. This study has found that the establishment of the proposed district would positively empower the Muslim community, their politics, and local administration in a number of ways such as i) an increase in concentration of Muslims in the district population, ii) administrative dominance and autonomy, iii) strengthening of representative politics and representative bureaucracy, iv) a territorial base for political autonomy, and v) empowerment of the major Muslim political party, the SLMC. However, this study has also found that these prospective political impacts strongly depend on the organizing and rational functioning of the district administrative machinery and bureaucracy, accommodation of linguistic grievances in public service delivery, strengthening of ethnic and social cohesion, and establishment of consensus among Muslim political leaders in the region.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Muslim Community, Amparai, Kalmunai Administrative District, Political Impacts

INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community that lives in the coastal belt of the Amparai district in eastern Sri Lanka has been demanding the central government authorities to establish a new administrative district (popularly referred to as "Kalmunai") for their administrative convenience and to facilitate the development administration functions in the region (referred to as the "South-Eastern region"). The Tamil-speaking Muslims are strongly motivated to advocate for the establishment of the proposed administrative district because of the ethnic domination of Sinhalese and the Sinhala language in district administration, as well as discrimination and marginalization of interests and due rights of Tamil-speaking minorities (both Tamils and Muslims), together with the violation of the minorities' linguistic right in public administration (Ibrahim, 2002; Noorul Haqu, 2002; Mohideen, 2013; Sarjoon et al., 2015 & Yusoff et al., 2015). The demand for the proposed Kalmunai administrative district emerged even before the formation of the Amparai district in 1961, and initially supported by the Tamils and Muslims living in this region, where the common banner of being a "Tamil-speaker" united both these ethnic groups. It was not until much later, especially with the

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intense ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka, that the Muslim community and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), a successful Muslim political party, started to intensely advocate the proposed district as a Muslim-majority administrative district; this effort has taken up the better part of 3 decades. However, this matter has also only received political importance in the last 15 years. The establishment of the Kalmunai administrative district would greatly affect the Muslim ethnic and minority politics as well as national politics. The subject of the proposed administrative district has been a sensitive political issue, which has political implications that are more relevant in the post-civil war era of Sri Lanka.

Given the above backdrop, this study has attempted to analyze the potential political impacts of the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district on the Muslim community and its politics at the regional as well as national levels. The SLMC leaders have strongly been advocating the Kalmunai administrative district which have received oppositions mostly from other Muslim and non-Muslim political forces and ethnic groups. The major justification that the advocates give for the proposed district is that it would reconcile the linguistic issues that the Tamils-speakers of the present Amparai district face in accessing services from the District Secretariat and other government departments. This is because the proposed district would be a predominant Tamil-speakers district where the district administration would be conducted in the Tamil language and thus would address the linguistic concerns of minorities regarding district administration (Ibrahim, 2002; Jabbar, 2013; Hasan Ali (Personal communication, 8 August 2014) & Yusoff et al., 2015). Another justification is that the proposed district would be a Muslim-majority district in which the Muslims can influence in the matters of administration, local governance and politics, and development affairs (Noorul Haqu, 2002 & Hasan Ali, Ibid). Also, the proposed district is justified on the basis that other ethnic groups such as the Sinhalese and Tamils have their own predominant administrative districts but not the Muslims, except the proposed one (Ibrahim, 2002; Noorul Hagu, 2002 & Jabbar, 2013).

Nevertheless, there are still different and contradicting arguments on the expected positive impacts on the Muslim community and its politics with the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district. However, the Muslim society and its political leaders have not conducted sufficient analysis and consultation on the consequences of establishing the proposed administrative district. Also, the major political party— the SLMC—and its leaders, who are the strong advocates of the establishment of the proposed district, have failed to academically or intensively study the political impacts of establishing the proposed administrative district from different angles; they have instead simply listed and propagated its positive impacts. In many occasions, these leaders have expressed that the establishment of the proposed administrative district would grant political autonomy to the Muslim community. On the other hand, the SLMC’s highly ethnicized advocacy has brought about a negative perception among the majority of the country’s population—the Sinhalese—that the Muslims are advocating for an autonomous unit or administrative district based on ethnicity—thereby threatening the territorial integrity of the country. All these recent political contexts on the subject of the Kalmunai administrative district has warranted an academic investigation and a detailed analysis of the political consequences of the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district on the Muslim community, the subject of which is presently lacking in academic literature. This study, to a certain extent, has attempted to fill this gap.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is one of the outcomes of a 3-year research project, which extensively studied the demand for the Kalmunai administrative district from different aspects. One such aspect was to examine the different kinds of political impacts pertaining to the Muslim community following the establishment of the proposed district. This study used two forms of data—primary and secondary—collected from different sources. The primary data was mainly collected from semi-structured interviews among selected parliamentarians, provincial councilors, local politicians, administrative elites, academics, journalists, and civil activists based on purposive sampling, and from focus group discussions conducted within the area of the proposed administrative district. The secondary data were collected from journal articles, books, government reports, and newspaper articles, accessed from reputed libraries and research centers. All these data were analyzed and then presented in this paper in the form of direct quotations, summaries, tables, and descriptive and interpretive arguments.

PROSPECTIVE POLITICAL IMPACTS FOLLOWING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF KALMUNAI ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT: MAJOR FINDINGS

This study has found that the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district, even with its negative impacts, could still positively impact Muslim politics in the region as well as the country to a certain extent, in the following manner:

Muslim Concentration in District Population

The concentration of ethnic Muslims (Moors) in the district population would be one of the major positive impacts following the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district, which will have more implications and impacts on the Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. The proposed district would be the one and only administrative district in which the Muslims will constitute the absolute majority in terms of population, and this will give the Muslims of this region a strong political identity at the national level. According to the latest census, the proposed district would constitute a population of 409,260 with 68.6 percent of this number being Muslims, as outlined in Table-1. These Muslims form about 14.84 percent of the country's total Muslim population and would form the largest Muslim-concentrated district in Sri Lanka. At present, Muslims do not form the absolute majority in any of the administrative districts, i.e., make up more than 50 percent in any district's population in Sri Lanka. Table-2 shows the Muslim concentration in the administrative districts of Sri Lanka according to the latest and complete population census conducted in 2012. Accordingly, although Muslims form the majority of the population in two districts namely, Amparai (43.4 percent) and Trincomalee (41.8 percent), the non-Muslim communities still make up more than half of the district population. Therefore, the Muslims' predominance in the population of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district will considerably impact in the administration and political affairs of the proposed district. Since Muslims are scattered through out the country, they have been facing difficulties in extending their influence in administrative and political affairs in the districts of Sri Lanka. Therefore, this absolute Muslim majority in the proposed district's population will strengthen their ethnic existence and identity nationally and internationally.

Table 1. The Ethnic Composition in the Population of the Proposed Kalmunai Administrative District (2012)

Ethnic Group	Size	Percentage
Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors)	280,909	68.6
Sri Lankan Tamils	112,093	27.4
Sinhalese	14,242	3.50
Others	2,014	0.50
Total	409,260	100.0

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2014.

Table 2. Muslim Concentration in the Administrative Districts of Sri Lanka (2012)

Name of Administrative District	Total Population	Muslim Concentration in District Population	Percentage of Muslims in District Population	Percentage of Muslims in Country Population
Colombo	2,324,349	249,609	10.75	13.19
Gampaha	2,304,833	97,621	4.25	5.16
Kalutara	1,221,948	113,320	9.30	5.99
Kandy	1,375,832	191,570	13.90	10.12
Nuwara Eliya	711,644	17,652	2.50	0.93
Matale	484,531	44,786	9.25	2.37
Kegalla	840,648	59,997	7.10	3.17
Rathnapura	1,088,007	22,347	2.05	1.18
Galle	1,063,334	38,790	3.65	2.05
Matara	814,048	25,254	3.10	1.33
Hambantoda	599,903	6,629	1.10	0.35
Moneragala	451,058	9,508	2.10	0.50
Badulla	815,405	44,716	5.50	2.36
Amparai	649,402	281,702	43.40	14.88
Batticaloa	526,567	133,854	25.40	7.07
Trincomalee	379,541	158,771	41.80	8.34
Anuradhapura	860,575	70,692	8.20	3.74
Polonnaruwa	406,088	30,177	7.40	1.60
Kurunegala	1,618,465	114,302	7.10	6.04
Puttalam	762,396	147,546	19.35	7.80
Mannar	99,570	16,436	16.50	0.87
Vavuniya	172,115	11,748	6.80	0.62
Mullaitivu	92,238	1,821	1.20	0.10
Kilinochchi	113,510	629	0.55	0.03
Jaffna	583,882	2,162	0.40	0.15
Total	20,359,439	1,892,638	9.30	100.00

Source: Calculated by the researchers based on population census (2012), see: Department of Census & Statistics, 2014.

Administrative Autonomy in District Administration Affairs

As a Muslim-majority administrative district, there will be more opportunities for Muslims to be appointed in higher positions of bureaucracy at the District Secretariat and in many decentralized government departments that come under the purview of the district administration. This would automatically allow them to dominate or influence in decision-making, and other administrative affairs of the proposed district to a certain extent. At present, no Muslim officer has been appointed as District Secretary in any of the 25 administrative districts in Sri Lanka. Although Muslims form the majority in 2 districts and there are sufficient senior-level Muslim officers in the Sri Lanka administrative service, they are appointed in other government departments, commissions, and ministries. It is worth noting that Muslims form the majority of the district population in Amparai from its inception, a Muslim administrative officer has never been appointed as District Secretary throughout the history of the district administration. This study also discovered that from the establishment of the Amparai district, 23 District Secretaries were appointed but none of them were Muslim or Tamil-speakers (District Secretariat Amparai, 2013). Therefore, the advocates of this proposed Kalmunai district are strongly advocating the appointment of a District Secretary and higher-level administrative officers from the Muslim or Tamil-speaking communities beginning with the present Amparai District Secretariat. Muslims see these appointments as their right for a share in representative bureaucracy based on their concentration in district population (Ibrahim, 2002 & Jabbar, 2013). However, successive governments continue to neglect these appeals in appointing a district secretary from the Tamil-speaking community, which in turn has intensified the advocacy of demand for the Kalmunai administrative district. Therefore, there would be higher possibilities for the appointment of more Muslim administrators in the district bureaucracy when the proposed Kalmunai district is established which would automatically grant them a considerable level of autonomy in district administrative affairs.

Political-Administrative Leadership

Following the establishment of the proposed administrative district, as a Muslim-majority district and the heartland of Muslim district politics, the chances for a Muslim parliamentarian to be appointed as the political head of the district administration would be higher. He or she could be appointed as Minister or Chairman of the District Coordinating Committee (DCC) that handles and decides most of the district-based development initiatives and the disbursement of funds allocated from the ministries and the other agencies for development purposes within the limits of the district. A review of the electoral politics reveals that a considerable number of Muslim representatives from this region have entered the parliament as elected or appointed members through the coalition politics of Muslim parties over the last two decades. During the period the SLMC known for its King-maker role in national politics, a Muslim minister has successfully chaired or co-chaired the DCC in the Amparai district, as detailed in Table-3. This clearly indicates that Muslim politicians will have a much stronger influence on the administrative affairs of the proposed district as political head of the district administration, which will definitely influence Muslim politics in the region.

Table 3. Muslim Parliamentarians and DCC Chairpersons from the Coastal belt of the Amparai district (1994-2016)

Period	Muslim Parliamentarians from the region (including National List)	Chairman / Co-Chairman of the DCC
1994-2000	MHM.Ashraff (EL-SLMC) ULM.Mohideen (EL-SLMC)	MHM.Ashraff
2000 (Oct)-2001 (Oct)	Ferial Ashraff (EL-SLMC+PA) ALM.Athaullah (EL-SLMC+PA) ULM.Mohidden (EL-SLMC+PA) M.Haneefa (NL-SLMC+PA) M.Abdul Majeed (NL-UNP)	Ferial Ashraff
2001 (Dec)-2004 (Feb)	Ferial Ashraff (EL-NUA+PA) ULM.Mohideen (EL-SLMC) M.H.Anwer Ismail (EL-SLMC) HMM.Harees (EL-SLMC) MH.Segu Issadeen (NL-NUA-PA)	ALM.Athaullah

Period	Muslim Parliamentarians from the region (including National List)	Chairman / Co-Chairman of the DCC
2004-2010	MM.Mustaffa (Myown) (NL-UNP) MBA.Azeez (NL-SLMC) Ferial Ashraff (EL-NUA+UPFA) ALM.Athaullah (EL-NC+UPFA) Rauff Hakeem (EL-SLMC) (Up to 2008) Faizal Cassim (EL-SLMC) AMM.Naoshaad (EL-SLMC) (From 2008) MT.Hasan Ali (NL-SLMC) H.M.Anwar Ismail (NL-NC+UPFA) (2004-2007) M.H.Segu Issadeen (NL-NUA+UPFA) S.Nijamudeen (NL-SLMC+UNP)	Ferial Ashraff, ALM.Athaullah
2010-2015	MM.Mustaffa (Myown) (NL-UNP) ALM.Athaullah (EL-NC+UPFA) HMM.Harees (EL-SLMC+UNF) Faizal Cassim (EL-SLMC+UNF)	ALM.Athaullah (Co-Chairman)
2015-	MT.Hasan Ali (NL-SLMC+UNF) Faizal Cassim (EL-SLMC+UNFGG) HMM.Harees (EL-SLMC+UNFGG) MIM.Mansoor (EL-SLMC+UNFGG)	MIM.Mansoor (Co-Chairman)

***EL**-Elected, **NC**-National Congress, **NL**-National List, **NUA**-National Unity Alliance, **SLMC**-Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, **PA**-Peoples Alliance, **UNF**-United National Front, **UNFGG**-United National Front for Good Governance, **UPFA**-United People Freedom Alliance

Source: Parliament of Sri Lanka (www.parliament.lk)

Ensured Muslim Representation of the Region in Parliament

The establishment of the proposed district would also impact in the electoral politics of Muslim community in the region and the country as well. The proposed district has 303,758 registered voters in its three electorates—71,254 in Kalmunai, 152,141 in Pottuvil and 80,357 in Sammanthurai electorates—according to the 2014 ballot counting (Department of Elections, 2015a). This amount of voters is higher than some electoral districts in Sri Lanka, which justifies the importance of declaring the proposed administrative district as an electoral district. At present, the proposed district is divided into three electorates with Pottuvil as a two-member electorate (one for Muslims and one for Tamils).

Before the introduction of the Proportional Representative (PR) electoral system in 1978, 4 members were elected for parliament from these three electorates. However, with the introduction of the PR system, the entire Amparai district has become one electoral district resulting in the loss of Tamil-speakers' representation in some parliamentary elections, as outlined in Table-4. If the proposed administrative district is declared as an electoral district, the district will be allocated 4 seats in parliament and the due representation of both Muslims and Tamils will be ensured in future parliamentary elections (refer to Table-5).

Besides that, the proposed district would be the one and only district with the maximum number of assured Muslim representation in parliament and therefore, the district would also act as the base for electoral politics for Sri Lankan Muslims. This will guarantee the impact of Muslim representation on ethnic and electoral politics at the national level as well. From the view of electoral politics of Muslims in Sri Lanka in general and the SLMC in particular, this region is quite popular and has been for the last 15 years. The emergence of Muslim district politics under the mobilization of SLMC, as the King-making party, has resulted in due Muslim representation, sometimes even more so from the present Amparai district than the Muslim concentration in the district's population, as outlined in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 4. Registered Voters and Ethnic-based Representation in Parliament Elections in Digamadulla (Amparai) Electoral District (1989-2015)

Year of Election	Voters per Polling Division					Elected Members on ethnic basis			
	Amparai	Kalmunai	Pottuvil	Sammanthurai	Total	S	M	T	Total
1989	92,901	43,579	82,231	44,453	265,768	04	01	01	06
1994	112,046	50,248	97,721	51,991	312,006	04	02	00	06
2000	124,504	56,513	113,519	58,100	352,537	03	03	01	07
2001	126,660	57,653	116,710	59,474	360,497	02	04	01	07
2004	132,371	60,456	123,051	63,166	379,044	02	04	01	07
2010	145,479	66,135	137,779	71,442	420,835	03	03	01	07
2015	161,999	71,254	152,147	80,357	465,757	03	03	01	07

***S**-Sinhalese **M**-Muslims **T**-Tamils

Source: Department of Elections, 1989; 1994; 2000; 2001; 2004; 2010 & 2015b.

Table 5. Registered Voters and Allocated Seats in the Parliament for Selected Electoral Districts in Sri Lanka (2014/2015)

Name of Electoral District	Registered Voters	Allocated Seats in Parliament
Matale	379,675	5
Vanni	253,058	6
Polennaruwa	307,125	5
Batticaloa	365,167	5
Trincomalee	256,852	4
Moneragala	339,797	5
Proposed Kalmunai district	303,758	4*

*Calculated by the researchers based on the Sri Lankan electoral system

Source: Department of Elections, 2015c.

Strengthening of the Electoral politics of the SLMC

The establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district would also impact in the electoral politics of the SLMC in particular. The SLMC is the only political party that has strongly been advocating the establishment of the proposed district, and is a major party that has continued to receive utmost support from the Muslim community in the region and the nation as a whole. It is a party that strongly represents the Muslims of this region in parliament, the provincial council, and in the local government bodies. Therefore, the establishment of the proposed district would bring more popular support for the SLMC in the future. According to Aliff (2014) (Personal communication, 14 July 2014), a senior academic, the establishment of the proposed district would be a political milestone for Muslims, and would contribute to the major success for the politics of SLMC; the party has yet to achieve any success after the demise of its founder leader in 2000. Even through the present national leader of the SLMC, Rauff Hakeem (Personal communication, 8 August 2014), argued that electoral benefit is not the ultimate objective of the establishment of the proposed district, many of its leaders (including its Secretary General) and supporters feel the opposite. It is worth noting that the SLMC's popular support in the region has continuously increased in consecutive elections despite the party receiving huge criticisms on a number of matters including its inability to establish the proposed administrative district through its popular support and politics of bargaining (refer to Table-3). Therefore, the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai district would bring collective electoral benefits to the SLMC and its leaders.

As a Base for Political Autonomy for Muslims in the Power-Sharing Mechanism

As a region predominated by the Muslim population, the territory of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district would be politically important nationally as well as in the Muslim politics of Sri Lanka. Until the establishment of SLMC, the first successful Muslim political party that attempted to make Muslim politics distinctive while the South-Western political leaders played a vital role in Muslim politics (Aliff and Sarjoon, 2010 & Imtiyas, 2012). With the emergence of the ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka, and the break-up of the political relationship with the Tamils, the Muslims in the eastern province had been searching for an alternative political institution not only to represent them at the national parliament but also to safeguard them from the impact of ethnic conflict and civil war.

The SLMC emerged in a timely context as a powerful political party with a popular support base mainly consisting of the "South-Eastern region," and became a voice for the issues, rights, and interests of Muslims, especially for those who live in the north-eastern region. For the cause of advocating the rights and concerns of north-eastern Muslims, the SLMC proposed a Muslim-majority autonomous unit in the merged north-eastern province, as an institutional safeguard for the existence of Muslims (Siddeeque, 1987; Segu Issadeen, 2007; Sarjoon, 2011 & Yusoff et al., 2014). The especial connection in relation to the impact of the proposed administrative district on Muslim politics is that the territory of the proposed administrative district will also be the heartland of the proposed Muslim-majority autonomous unit, which covers the major Muslim pockets in the north-eastern province on a non-contiguous basis, similar to the Pondicherry model in south India.[i] There has been changing dynamics in the overall picture of the Muslim-majority political autonomous unit over its 3-decade long politics of survival, but the "South-Eastern region" still remains its heartland up until now. A special concern in connection with the territory of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district is that from 1994-2000, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government, when it attempted to resolve the ethnic conflict through sharing of powers between regions (or regionally concentrated ethnic groups), proposed the establishment of a "South-Eastern regional council", so as to accommodate the interests of political autonomy of eastern Muslims. This "South-Eastern regional council" was expected to cover the same territory with that of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district. The SLMC leaders also strongly supported this "South-Eastern regional council" during that time (See: Fousar, 1997 & Yusoff et al., 2014).

Many Muslims including politicians, academicians, and the public agree that the proposed Kalmunai district would empower Muslim politics and their thirst for political autonomy in a number of ways. In support of the above opinion, the SLMC's Secretary General expressed his view that the establishment of the proposed district would be the base of power for Muslims in Sri Lanka, as it would empower the electoral politics of Muslims (Hassan Ali, Ibid). Noorul Haqu (Personal communication, 3 August, 2014), a senior journalist and Muslim activist, argued that the proposed district would be the base for any kind of political power-sharing unit for Muslims in any ethnic conflict resolution process. Academics who have extensively worked on Muslim politics such as Aliff (Ibid) and Fousar (Personal communication, 22 September, 2014) also agree that the proposed district would politically empower Muslims, especially the politics of the SLMC, which would accommodate the Muslim interest for political autonomy. According to Aliff (Ibid), the establishment of the proposed district would also form the basis for the establishment of future Muslim-majority autonomous units.

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[i] Pondicherry is one of the union territories of India, consisting of four non-contagious enclaves or districts – Karaikal, Mahe, Pondicherry and Yenam – located within the states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu respectively, without being territorially contiguous and yet functioning as an entity. The total area of the territories including the pockets is only 492 sq.km or 190 sq. miles. The size of the pockets of Karaikal, Yanam, and Mahe are 160, 30, & 9 km^2, respectively. For further details on the subject of Pondicherry in India visit: www.pondicherry.nic.in.

DISCUSSION

There are opposing arguments among the Muslims on the political impacts following the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district for the Muslim community and its politics. Many SLMC leaders and its supporters find that the establishment of the proposed district would positively benefit the Muslims of this region, including empowering them with political autonomy. According to them, the region would gain economic benefits through separate budgetary allocations and financial aids that can be utilized entirely within the proposed district for the improvement and development of the socio-economic conditions of its communities, particularly for Muslims living in the region who have been marginalized in terms of development e.g., in the post-tsunami and post-civil war recovery process. This is one of the strong justifications that has driven the SLMC leaders to advocate for the establishment of the administrative district.[ii]

However, on the other hand, some find that the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district would not bring any political benefits to the Muslim community in the region. Advocates of these arguments point out that the proposed district would not bring any political power or benefit to Muslims since the District Secretariat will exercise only a mere form of decentralized administrative power i.e., de-concentration. Under the present system of district administration, the central government has the mechanism to control the entire aspect of district administration to a much greater extent (Segu Issadeen, Personal communication, 28 August, 2014). Similarly, according to the SLMC chairman, Basheer Shehu Daavood (Personal communication, 11 September, 2014), the establishment of the proposed district cannot or would not be the solution for all Muslim problems in Sri Lanka, and that the establishment of the proposed district is meaningless and would not influence Muslim politics in any way. Furthermore, another argument posits that the establishment of the proposed district would negatively influence in Muslim politics, as it would create more competitions among Muslim politicians, which in turn may lead to loss of due representations of Muslims and would instead benefit the other ethnic groups in electoral politics (Segu Issadeen, Ibid). It is obvious that on two important occasions (in 2001 and in 2003), the call for the establishment of the proposed administrative district failed or became unsuccessful because of the fragmentation within Muslims politics, i.e., failure in building consensus on the contested subjects of the proposed district among the Muslim leaders of the region (See: Deshavimala 2001; Skynetbit.com 2005). On the other hand, the Sinhalese argue that the establishment of administrative districts based on ethnicity, as per the demands of the SLMC leaders, can result in the emergence of more ethnic-based demands that would intensify the conflicts among ethnic groups and threaten the country's territorial integrity (See: Dissanayake 2014 & Indrajith 2014). It is also worth noting that the establishment of the proposed district alone cannot resolve all or many of the problems that the Muslims [and Tamils] are facing in terms of district administration in Amparai. Furthermore, it cannot immediately bring any kind of political power or autonomy to the Muslims, as argued by the SLMC leaders and advocates of the proposed district.

[ii] As part of the larger study on the demand for the Kalmunai administrative district, a separate focus study on the economic and development impacts following the establishment of the proposed district was also conducted. See: Yusoff et al. (2016).

The establishment of the proposed district could also help reconcile the internal fragmentation within SLMC and to strengthen its politics in the region. For the last few years, the SLMC's leadership has been facing major challenges from this region, as it has marginalized the people of the region in terms of resource allocation, provision of job opportunities, and in the political decision-making within the party. The people of this region have been demanding that the SLMC national leadership be given to a leader of the region since the party has its core electoral and moral supporters from the region. This has caused many founder members of the SLMC to leave the party and form new political parties, which oppose the fundamental principles of the SLMC. Ever since the end of the 2015 general elections, there has been a long-held rivalry between the national leader and the secretary general of SLMC, who is not only the senior founder member but also the son of the region. On the other hand, after the demise of the SLMC's founder leader, MHM.Ashraff, who also hailed from the region, the party under the present leadership has not achieved any notable success in national politics as well as in Muslim politics and has even failed to reconcile administrative and other grievances of Tamil-speakers, particularly of Muslims of the region; although the party has been maintaining higher representations at the national, provincial, and local levels from the region, and have had a strong partnership or coalition politics with successive central governments. Therefore, the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai district would be a notable achievement for the SLMC and its leaders, which could also be an easy means for them to keep the voters' support over a certain period in the region.

Although the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district would positively impact the Muslim community and its politics, this study has found that the expected positive impacts would strongly depend on a number of factors, which are manifested in the form of various challenges, as highlighted below:

a) The appointment of a considerable number of Tamil-speaking or Muslim bureaucrats to the District Secretariat of the proposed district and to other decentralized government departments that come under the purview of the District Secretariat could be a major challenge. Case in point: even though the Muslims form the majority in the district population of Amparai, Muslim politicians who have been influential in district and national politics and have proudly been referred to as "King-makers," have not been able to convince or given justification to the government authorities to appoint a Tamil-speaking or Muslim District Secretary for the Amparai District Secretariat up until now. They were not even able to stop the appointment of a Sinhalese Divisional Secretary (DS) to the Kalmunai (Muslim) Divisional Secretariat (in 2014), which not only has about 99 percent Muslims in its population, but is also the heartland of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district.

b) Admitting Tamils into district administration and in local administrative affairs in the proposed district is another key factor that will determine the success of the proposed district and its positive impacts on Muslim politics. Since the new district is also justified on linguistic basis, the success of the district will only benefit Muslim politics only if the Tamil-speakers are able to receive and access the public (administrative) services in their own language whilst allowing the Sinhalese to access the services in their own language as well. Although, at present, the Tamil-speakers constitute over 62 percent of the district population in Amparai, the district has continued to be administered in the Sinhalese language, violating the rights guaranteed in the constitution to conduct administration in Tamil-language in the districts of the north-eastern region.[iii]

c) The political success for the Muslims following the establishment of the proposed district is highly dependent on the ability of the Muslim politicians to convince the government authorities to declare the proposed administrative district as an electoral district as well. Even though the SLMC leaders and supporters claim that the establishment of the Kalmunai administrative district would positively impact Muslim politics, they have never voiced for the declaration of the proposed district as an electoral district. Since many administrative districts can be merged together and considered as an electoral district according to the present electoral system, and because the Sinhalese have been benefitting in terms of fund allocations and political representation in the present Amparai district (Digamadulla), the central government might prefer to keep the proposed administrative district as part of the present Digamadulla electoral district. On the other hand, the declaration of an electoral district must also be done through the passing of a constitutional amendment with two-thirds majority in favor of the proposal. Therefore, the positive impacts of the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai district would strongly depend on the success of declaring it as an electoral district. This must be done together with the establishment of the proposed administrative district.

d) The unity between the Muslim politicians and the community is also important for the success of the establishment and functioning of the proposed district and the realization of the positive impacts it would have on Muslim politics. Even though the SLMC has a strong hold on Muslim politics, the regional politics is highly fragmented. There are three major Muslim parties that function in this region, which have popular support and representation at the national, provincial, and local levels, namely, the SLMC, the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), and the National Congress (NC). Due to the opposing politics among these parties, the Muslims have lost their due representation in many elections. A recent example in this regard was the parliament election held on the 17th of August 2015. In this election, at the Digamadulla electoral district, the ACMC, a party formed from the split in SLMC, received 33,102 (10.15 percent) votes, made up of entirely Muslim voters, but it failed to secure a seat due to the shortage of about 2,500 votes required to do so (See: Department of Elections, 2015d). On the other hand, the United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) received 22,749 votes from this region, and mostly the Muslim vote of the NC, but the party could not elect any Muslim representative from its list even though the leader of the NC, another party formed from the split in SLMC, was also part of the election with the UPFA. If these two Muslim parties were able to form an alliance and further contested the election together, they could have received at least one seat, which would have increased the Muslim representation from this region in the parliament. If this fragmented politics continue unabated, the establishment of the proposed district would not bring the expected electoral benefits to the Muslims of the region.

[iii] According to the provisions of the present constitution, Sinhala and Tamil are the national as well as official languages of Sri Lanka. The 13th and 16th amendments that were adopted in the constitution in 1987 and 1988, respectively, have guaranteed administration in the Tamil language particularly in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. For more details, see (Parliament Secretariat, 2015; Yusoff et al., 2015)

e) The social cohesion among ethnic groups has also become one of the pre-conditions for the success of the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai district and its positive impacts on Muslim politics. Although the proposed district is predominated by Muslims, it is still a multi-ethnic district. History reveals that there have been mutual relationships and peaceful co-existence among the three major ethnic groups in the region (See: Hasbullah et al., 2005 & Rameez Abdullah, 2005). However, following the intense ethnic conflict and civil war, the politics and administration have become strongly ethnicized where each ethnic group view the other as the enemy. The Muslim community and its politicians have been justifying the establishment of the proposed district as a district for Muslims and claiming that the proposed district would bring them political autonomy. On one hand, they have failed to determine the differences in terms of structure, decentralized power, and functions between an administrative district and a political autonomous unit. On the other hand, they have failed to accommodate the interests and grievances of other ethnic groups. This can lead to the Muslims dominating the entire administration of the proposed district. This potential Muslim domination has been identified as one of the major factors that have motivated the non-Muslims in the region to oppose and criticize the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai district. Also, the other ethnic groups living in the proposed district have been facing a number of administrative issues, which the Muslim politicians have yet to accommodate or articulate on. This has also induced them to oppose the establishment of the proposed district. Therefore, building consensus among ethnic groups on a number of socio-economic and administrative matters will not only lead to social cohesion but will also strengthen future the Muslim politics in the region.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For the last 3 decades, the Tamil-speaking people, particularly the Muslim community living in the coastal belt of the Sri Lanka’s Amparai district, have been advocating for the establishment of the Kalmunai administrative district expecting that it would simplify administrative processes and advance other political-development agendas. The demand for the Kalmunai administrative district has been contested over the last 15 years in Sri Lanka’s ethnic politics in general and in Muslim politics, in particular. This study has examined the prospective political impacts following the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai district on the Muslim community and its politics. As laid out in this paper, the Muslim concentration in the proposed district’s population could have positive impacts on the identity and existence of the Muslim community, and its political identity to a certain extent. Also, their increased concentration in the district population will enable them to influence and dominate the administrative affairs of the district as well as progressively grant them political-administrative leadership in the proposed district, which could include the chairman position of the DCC or district minister, while ensuring the Muslims’ political representation. Furthermore, the proposed district could act as the political autonomy base for the eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka as part of the power-sharing mechanism for resolving Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict in the future. However, the success of these potentially positive impacts following the establishment of the proposed Kalmunai administrative district highly depends on the success of implementing Tamil as the official language and the recruitment of a higher number of Tamil-speaking administrators in the district administrative bureaucracy, declaration of the proposed district as an electoral district, and building a consensus between Muslims and other communities and politicians on a number of contested aspects of the proposed district, e.g., naming of the district and positioning of its secretariat, allocation of positions within the district bureaucracy, utilization of resources, and enhancement of ethnic and social cohesion with the different ethnic groups living in the proposed district. Muslim civil activists and political leaders are considered the main parties responsible for implementing and ensuring that these actions are executed accordingly.

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