

Role of Religious Leaders in Reconciliation Process in Sri Lanka

Aruna Jayathilaka¹, Moahmed Ansari²

¹Lecturer in Political Science, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

²Program Officer, National Peace Council, Sri Lanka

Abstract:-Religion plays a vital role in modern conflicts through creating a powerful impact on peace building. The values contained in great religious teachings are essential to address and eradicate root causes of conflicts and attributes of religions including reliability as a trusted institution, a respected set of values, moral warrants for opposing injustice on the part of governments, unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties, a capability to mobilize communities are important in promoting peace and reconciliation. This study investigates the role of religious leaders in the process of post war reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Study applies qualitative methods by interviewing the project stakeholders of a particular project 'Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom' which covers eight districts in Sri Lanka.

Key words: Religion, reconciliation, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

There is an obvious need for building long term peace amongst Sri Lankan society which is formed after the disastrous 30-year civil war. At the same time there is a need for correct approach in bringing normalcy in the life of civilians is formed in the reconciliation period after the war. Even though visible conflicts are no more, it is clear that the after-effects will last for long in the Sri Lankan society. War did not destroy only the life's and properties the society is harvesting the impediments of it. So, correct and clear methods should be utilized to avoid future conflicts. Basic reasons for clashes must be diagnosed and the total population should be referred to a reconciliation process. In this national process and the religious leaders who represent multi nationals can be identified as levers.

The unique position enjoyed by the clergy in socio economic culture and politics has a long history in Sri Lanka up to now. The clergy is working in the level of advisers as well as reverends with the civil powers. From the ancient time, they have been the guiders and advisers in the social, political and economic process. The recent incidents of decisive moments confirm the cherished welcome the religious leaders received by the Sri Lankan Society. The support delivered by the Buddhist leaders for war victory had made great effect in the creation of an ideology at state and social level. At the same time the religious leaders of Hindu, Catholic, Islam are guiding their respective racial groups towards solvable opportunities is a practically confirmed fact.

The role of religious leaders of Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, and Islam in the process of national reconciliation is unique and special. The purpose of the study is to identifying how the role of religious leaders is so significant in the reconciliation process and to investigate the good and bad effects of religious leaders when acting as the pressure groups. There is no formed national level work plan to receive the contribution of religious leaders in the reconciliation process.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Area

The research was a micro study applying qualitative methods by interviewing the project stakeholders of Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom in eight districts. Under this project, 08 local inter-religious committees formed with the representation of police, religious leader, government officers and civil society/ community based organizational leaders. The research areas are Ampara, Beruwela, Badulla, Kandy, Mannar, Matara, Negombo and Vavuniya

2.2 Sample

The research sample was drawn from a list of Inter- religious committee members of the project of National Peace Council called Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom. The sample size for the study is 150 members who the active members of LIRCs in the eight district, these include the aggregation of gender and followers of different faiths The study involved 86 religious leaders, 34 government officers and 30 CSO leaders from the LIRC members of eight districts. The research assessed the level of understanding of those LIRC members and the insight about the role of religious leaders in the peace process of the country.

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Interviews:

This mainly involved transcription of recorded responses from questionnaires and notebooks, then clustering of information into various themes that represent interviewees' voices, opinions and feeling and their understanding on reconciliation process

2.4 Research Tool:

2.4.1 Analytical Questions

Query for the research is how far the religious leaders contributed their forceful and unique talent in the empowerment of reconciliation process after the war. Whether the religious leaders of Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic and Islam in the process of national reconciliation had taken action to accommodate their respective racial groups in the reconciliation process is the suitable research query.

2.5 Summary of Design and Response

In this study, the researcher looks for the answer to the question of can national reconciliation process efforts alone, without the focus on inter-faith peace building, lead for sustainable peace? This question illustrates two different approaches to the same situation. While National reconciliation is based on political reconciliation, economical reconciliation and social reconciliation that establish and secure peace by peaceful means.

Civil society organizations are often working, or should work, on a daily basis in a reality which connects to this particular question and have to relate to it in their policy and practice. But this issue doesn't bother only CSOs, but all level of governmental institutions should build up and strengthen existing organizations that work towards inter-faith peace building.

2.6 Data Analysis Method:

In order to arrive the conclusive finding of the study, the researcher used to analyze the observed and expressed views of the respondents by categorizing them in excel sheet, to measure supportive factors to justify the hypotheses of the study

III. ANALYSIS

The analysis is focused on two main questions. They are How do you see role of religious leaders in national reconciliation process? And what religious communities can do in order to contribute strengthening national reconciliation process after ending 26 years violent conflict?

However generally, researcher kept asking what reconciliation meant to them. Responses made clear that the word reconciliation is not familiar to the interviewed religious leaders. 40% of religious leaders are did not have a clear picture about what reconciliation is but 60% of them gave variety of answers including definitions that focused on individual reconciliation, promoting understanding, unity, forgiveness, apology restoring trust and understandings.

3.1 How do you see role of religious leaders in national reconciliation process?

Religious leaders, government officers and members of civil society were able to answer this question giving some examples from their communities that were really interesting. Most of the research participants were interested to speak out this issue where they judged about the top level of religious leaders' political dramas. All of the research participants

expressed that it is very important to understand religious leaders in this country have big role to play in reconciliation process and peace building.

Some of the religious leaders, specially Christians and Islam religious leaders draw up attention on individual reconciliation that should be promoted by preaching in their Churches and Mosques and they have done it to some degree. As well as they think that significant chunk of time should be spent on teaching on reconciliation based on core principles of their religious teaching on peace building by bringing up historical examples of unity and harmony. 80% of Buddhist research participants including Rev. monks expressed that building inner peace is most important factor of reconciliation; focusing on building individual understanding on their responsibilities.

Research participants were able to give some examples of grass root level reconciliation efforts carried out by NGOs such as Sarvodaya, National Peace Council, Center for Peace building and Reconciliation, Caritas, and Sewa Lanka and some few government agencies. Among these agencies, National Peace council established District level inter religious committees in 22 districts and formed 08 Local inter religious committees under the collective engagement for religious freedom project to educate, mobilize and trained the religious readers of different faiths in the country to promote religious co-existence within the framework of rule of law and pluralism.

Religious leaders mentioned that it is very important to bring community leaders and youths together from different communities where they can build up relationships and understanding. This indicates that grass root initiatives or actions on inter-faith peace building can influence a society towards reconciliation. 100% of the research participants agreed that religious leaders are powerful more than other parties in this country who are able to turn the society either towards positively or negatively.

90% of the Hindu, Christian and Islam religious leaders are not happy about the role of Buddhist religious leaders in terms of national reconciliation process. They expressed that Rev. Buddhist monks should not be align with political parties and doing hate speeches that create tension in Sri Lankan society. Research participants expressed that it is very important to bring top level religious leaders into an open stage where they should stand on principles of reconciliation.

Hindu, Christian and Islam religious leaders think it is not necessary to celebrate war victory that killed hundred thousand of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims as human beings and rather than celebrating killing, it is better to name a day of forgiveness and reconciling of Sri Lankan society. Furthermore, all the religious leaders, government officers and civil society members think that medias in this country do not know how to be more peace sensitive reporting.

Researcher was able to witness that different religious groups in this country have not understood their role as religious leaders in the process of national reconciliation. It is obvious that no one want to experience any violent conflict in this society.

3.2. What religious communities can do in order to contribute strengthening national reconciliation process after ending 26 years violent conflict?

Answers for this question, what religious leaders can do in order to contribute strengthening national reconciliation process after 26 years violent conflict were very interesting that discover other aspects of inter-faith peace building and reconciliation. All of the research participants agreed that main role of national reconciliation process should be played by religious leaders. 90% research participants who responded to this question reported that religious leaders are not aware of their responsibility that connected with national reconciliation process. 80% respondents said that there are no opportunities for religious leaders in communities to contribute reconciliation process.

As a part of this research, researcher referred and studied the project documents of the inter-religious cooperation for community development and social empowerment that implemented by Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Anuradhapura districts. This project that Implemented inter-faith community development and social empowerment program helps to build up understanding and restore trust between communities affected by 26 years violent conflict. Religious leaders always need to play as the key connectors of society building in the post war conflict context and this is not an easy task. However, Sarvodaya has meaningfully implemented community development and social empowerment projects in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Anuradhapura districts where communities from different faith and ethnic groups came together to implement activities or projects with the supports of religious leaders. Religious leaders in their communities have built a safe environment where everyone could participate without fear. Community developments activities such as language classes, educational programs, awareness creations, Shramadana, sport festivals, livelihood activities, exchange programs and cultural sharing have implemented by inter-faith committees in the district with the supports of district Sarvodaya centers.

As reflected in interviews with religious leaders, they are particularly seen reconciliation is a part of their preaching but which they do not do every day for their followers. As well as reconciliation can be started from religious leadership level. Government's initiatives to bring religious leaders and religious organizations together will benefit whole society and it will impact on strengthening national reconciliation process. Religious leaders together should focus on reconciliation in three different aspects of peace building, Social peace building, Political peace building and Cultural peace building.

In terms of Social Peace Building, religious leaders are the most powerful and influenced actors in Sri Lankan society who can bring communities together to build social peace which will contribute trust building among communities. In addition, political actors can be influenced to come together to initiating power devolution aspects which are connected with political peace building. To take necessary economic peace building actions, religious leaders and organizations could work with national, international, private and non-profit organizations to strengthening the economy which contributes economic peace building in country.

As a part of this project religious leaders together have drawn out a proposal that presented in their national conference. Following mentions recommendations have been developed by district inter-faith councils in order to strengthen inter-faith peace building in Sri Lanka.

1. In order to strengthen national reconciliation, should establish religious unity groups in all districts and create acceptance of such a move in all responsible sectors.
2. Ensure that the government accept and encourages all sectors that honestly work toward national reconciliation
3. Commence a national coordination system consisting of national level religious leaders in order to neutralize situations that might lead to conflicts, promoted by elements which intend harming the present national reconciliation process.
4. All political parties act with great responsibility in stopping religious and ethnic conflicts.
5. In carrying out welfare and development activities, whatever the organization involved in such activities should not select groups according to ethnicity or religion but select communities that deserve assistance.
6. Draw the attention of all persons in power to help annihilate doubt, fear, mistrust and violence and hold more programmes that promote unity and inter personal understanding.
7. All responsible sectors should ensure and establish at maximum possible level factors that help unity among ethnic and religious groups.
8. Refrain from exerting pressure and influence to stop religious events of any place of worship.
9. Provide facilities to teach Sinhala and Tamil languages among all communities in Sri Lanka.
10. Introduce policies and programmes to preserve the cultural values which are dwindling fast in the present-day society.
11. All religious sectors should conduct programmes promoting peace.
12. Enact laws to prevent any mechanism, print, electronic or any other form using the facilities to insult any religion.

13. Take steps to implement the recommendations of LLRC relating to reconciliation and encourage local organizations keen on implementing the reconciliation process.
14. Establish a national institute to carry out activities relating to national reconciliation and government to ensure that activities are carried out actively.
15. Take legal action against individuals, institutions or groups that create religious conflicts.
16. A system should be created to control effects directed towards destroying or changing identities of any religion.
17. Media should highlight the effects towards building peoples' collective consciousness for the purpose of strengthening inter-religious and inter-ethnic co-existences
18. New political system should have initiated to develop sustainable peace and mete out justice to all in equal terms.
19. All political parties should have a code of ethics to refer to
20. All religious leaders should adhere to the basic principles of their religions; serve with dedication, and good examples to the general public.

IV. FINDINGS

National reconciliation is not an isolated activity of a few people. The research connected with the project of Collective engagement for Religious Freedom conducted clearly showed that religious leaders in this country have not pictured their power, values that can be utilized for building the Sri Lanka society where all people are equally treated and respected. People in this country are burdened with confusion and frustration due to complexities of language, religion, ethnicity and other variances and opportunities should be provided to create an environment of unity, cooperation and respect, space should be provided, devoid of differences promoting co-existence.

So far, since independence in 1948, religions have played a role of dividing communities rather than bringing communities together as religious leaders have forgot core principles of religious teaching on peace building. The question that Sri Lankan society not answered is how religious leaders can be the connecting factors of peace building process and not being the dividing factor in this conflict context.

Religious leaders from all faith groups empathized important of carrying out a widespread programme of social dialogue relating to inter-faith peace building and faith-based reconciliation that encourages followers to use multi ethnic and religious principles of peace building in each religion individually and collectively as an access to promote co-existence.

Government officers, youths and other civil society organizations wanted to have public dialogues among most knowledgeable religious leaders at district and divisional level continually that enhance mutual understanding among religious leaders which impact whole society. It is noticed that existing district inter-faith religious council setup by Sarvodaya and other organizations should be further strengthened and by getting wider participation of general public.

Grass-root level community organizations should be encouraged towards empowering the community in promoting religious and ethnic co-existence as a means of achieving co-existence. Religious leaders highlighted that initiating inter-faith activities help to build up trust and understanding among people from different faith groups as well as community organizations should be encouraged to carry out their activities promoting inter-faith as a cross cutting theme of their programs.

This study brought better practical and effective community-based interventions that can be recommended to rebuild strengths, adaptation, coping strategies and resilience and in that context religious leaders play a significant role. The values contained in great religious teachings are essential to address and eradicate root causes of conflicts and attributes of religions including reliability as a trusted institution, a respected set of values, moral warrants for opposing injustice on the part of governments, unique leverage for promoting reconciliation among conflicting parties, a capability to mobilize communities are important in promoting peace and reconciliation.

V. RECOMMENDED INITIATIVES

5.1 Religion as a process for reconciliation and peace building

Religion always can be a connecting factor of bringing communities together by pulling out all the commonalities in all major religions in Sri Lanka. Religious leaders have responsibilities of preaching compassion, love, kindness and forgiveness that will help to create a peace-loving society and reconciled the conflict affected society.

5.2. Inter-faith community development and social empowerment programs

This is very important components of reconciliation and peace building in post conflict contexts that bring communities together from different faith groups together which create safer environments for the people who affected by war, wounded by war. This is a key fact of social peace building. Religious leaders I interviewed highly recommend initiating inter-faith peace building activities in their communities such as Shramadana, sport festivals, cultural sharing.

5.3 Inter-faith dialogues

Inter-faith dialogue is a tool that creates peaceful discussion in multi ethnic communities towards their common needs.

Religious leaders, community leaders and community leaders can facilitate these dialogues in their communities

5.4 National Center for inter-faith peace building

It is highly recommended to set up a National Center for Inter-faith peace Building that will create top level dialogues among top level religious leaders in the country. This should become a responsibility of government. As we are a multi ethnic and multi-cultural community, as we naturally face conflicts, so it is better to set up such center to deal with faith-based conflicts in Sri Lanka.

5.5 Inter-faith peace journalism

Inter-faith peace journalism is not practiced in Sri Lanka so far. It is very important to build ethics towards creating inter-faith peace journalism in Sri Lanka as Journalism play a strong influencing factor of manipulating conflicts

5.6 Conflict sensitive and cultural sensitive programming

Conflict and cultural sensitive programming is highly recommended as we are strongly culturally connected. This means that our program, activities or projects are always play a role of connecting communities rather than being dividers.

VI. CONCLUSION

It can be clearly identified that role of religious leaders is very vital for reconciliation process in Sri Lanka since this country is connected with each other all the religious and cultural values and believes. If we discuss about national reconciliation program, no one cannot forget the significant power of religious leaders who can bring communities together from different faith and ethnic groups.

Sri Lankan society that consists the Buddhist, Hindu, Islamist, Christian Catholic religious leaders are dedicated workers keen on human welfare, based on the teachings of religious leaders. With the unshaken belief that at this decisive

moment as religious leaders have to give leadership to the people on national reconciliation and towards achieving this goal and have to actively worked with all stages of Sri Lankan society.

Religion plays a crucial role in modern conflicts through creating a powerful impact on peace building. Though there are considerable challenges that must be addressed, religious leaders can play a significant role in reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Abraham, T. (2006). 'The Emergence of the LTTE and the Indo-Lanka Agreement of 1987', chapter 2 in K. Rupasinghe (ed.): *Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka. Efforts, Failures and Lessons. Volume One.* Colombo: The Foundation for Co-Existence.
- [2]. Coomaraswamy, R (2003). 'The Politics of Institutional Design: An Overview of the Case of Sri Lanka', chapter 5 in S. Bastian & R. Luckham (eds.): *Can Democracy Be Designed? The Politics of Institutional Choice in Conflict-torn Societies.* New York: Zed Books.
- [3]. Dhammananda, G, (2013), National Conference 'The Role of Religion in Reconciliation' LakshmanKadirgamar Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKIIRSS).
- [4]. Ganiel G, 2000, *Surveying Religion's Public Role: Perspectives on Reconciliation, Diversity and Ecumenism in Northern Ireland.*
- [5]. Hamber B and Hugo M, (1998), "What Is This Thing Called Reconciliation?" , paper presented at the Goedgeacht Forum Cape Town.
- [6]. Hamber B & Kelly G, (2004), *A Working Definition of Reconciliation*, Paper published by Democratic Dialogue, Belfast.
- [7]. Hofsvang M, 2008, *Political representation and conflict in a multi ethnic society; A study of the civil war and the challenge.*
- [8]. John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins and Francis Teeney, 2011, *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- [9]. Karuna Center for Peace Building, (2013), *Inter-faith peace building training manual.* http://www.karunacenter.org/uploads/9/6/8/0/9680374/___karunacenter_inter-faith-tot-guide-2013.pdf (Accessed on 01.08.2019)
- [10]. Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation, (2011), *Lesson Learnt Reconciliation Commission Sri Lanka.*