Religious Tensions in Sri Lanka

What is the issue?

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- Religious tensions have been simmering within the Sri Lankan society ever since the end of the civil war in 2009.
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- While it is important to reign in the Buddhist hardliners, other structural frictions in the social fabric of the island also needs to be addressed.
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What are the incidences of social tensions?

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- When Mahinda Rajapaksa was in power, anti-Muslim violence was unleashed by Buddhist mobs, in Aluthgama in 2014.
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- The new government, which was elected in 2015 had promised an end to such violence but the recent events show that things haven’t changed.
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- Over 200 homes and 14 mosques were destroyed in Kandy district, which is indicative of the fact that the anti-Muslim project is only gaining steam.
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- As the intensity of the situation resulted in even curbing social media and imposing an emergency – a sober post-crisis assessment is necessary.
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What are the factors that precipitated the crisis?

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- **Cultural -** Sinhalese see Muslims as aliens who are a growing, united and an economically persevering group, with a strong mooring to religiosity.
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- In contrast, Buddhists are liberal in religious practices and ethno-religious affiliations, which are resented by the Buddhist clergy.
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- These fundamental differences and the keenness of Buddhist hardliners for cultural dominance get translated into hatred and even violence at times.
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- **Geo Political -** The rise of Islamic State in the West Asia had seen an increase in radicalisation of Islamic youth in the eastern province.
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- Some Islamic fundamentalists were also found to be running anti-Buddhist propaganda, which had caused a real security situation in the island.
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- **Domestic -** Although unsubstantiated, fears of increasing Muslims populations had created a demographic scare among some sections.
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- There are also allegations against Muslim politicians of being engaged in land acquisitions and the illegal resettlement of Muslims.
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- A strong community bonding which helped further Muslims businesses has also created economic anxiety among the poorer Buddhist masses.
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What lies ahead?

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- **Novice Voices -** Many celebrities have voiced against this violence and stressed that the “Sri Lankan identity” is accommodative and diverse.
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- While these assertions are well intentioned, they present an erroneous view that the current crisis is a mere aberration caused by a violent few.
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- Addressing the problem first requires recognizing that there are strong linguistic and religious fault lines within the Sri Lankan polity.
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- **Way Forward –** As a first step, all persons who’ve been involved in the violence need to be prosecuted impartially in order to ensure accountability.
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- This needs to be followed up by initiating a dialogue between Sinhala Buddhist groups, the Muslim leadership and the government for genuine reconciliation.
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- Finally, Sri Lanka needs to evolve into a secular-minded state by according

equal status to all religious groups and dominions.
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- All citizens needs to be nurture a mindset that is open to diversity, which is critical for lasting peace and progress in the island.
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Source: The Hindu

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