

A Rapid Program to Reform Arabic Colleges

(Presented on 10th December 2020)

1) Introduction

On the 21st of April 2019, three churches and three luxury hotels in Colombo were subjected to a series of coordinated terrorist suicide bombings. These were followed by two other separate explosions in Dehiwala and Dematagoda. The day ended with the death of 267 people and leaving close to 500 others injured. This catastrophe is referred to as the ‘Easter Sunday Attack’. It is believed that the attacks were planned and executed by a local Islamic militant group either independently or with foreign collaboration.

There have been demands from the Muslim community for reforming the Madrasa education institutes long before the Easter Sunday attacks for reasons of the quality and quantity issues. Anyway the demand for reforming these institutes were intensified not only from Muslims but others too, especially after Easter Terror attack. Since then, there have been several attempts to reform the current system, but none have reached fruition.

“Draft Madrasa Education Act” was also drafted and presented to the cabinet on 13th May 2019 by the then Minister of Muslim Religious Affairs with the support of all Muslim parliamentarians and Ulama. A final draft was submitted on the 17th July 2019 with the view of other members of the cabinet accommodated with the change of name as “Draft Islamic Education Act”.

Consequently, on the 14th of May 2019, the Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security was presented with an initial set of proposals signed by Hon. Members of Parliament to be reviewed. The Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security published its Report of the Proposals for Formulation and Implementation of relevant laws required to ensure National Security that will eliminate New Terrorism and Extremism by strengthening friendship among Races and Religions on the 19th of February 2020.

Further to these reform attempts, a Special Parliamentary Select Committee was appointed to concurrently investigate the attacks and produce their findings with potential recommendations on the 22nd of May 2019. The committee presented its report to the parliament on the 23rd October 2019.

A recent study on ‘Contemporary Madrasah Education System in Sri Lanka’ published by the Community Association of Professionals - a group of Muslim intellectuals, on 20th March 2020 addresses the same concerns.

Each of these documents have distinctively identified a common set of issues related to Madrasa Institutions and contain a variety of suggestions to overcome the concerns recognized. This document is a compilation of the most comprehensive reforms

presented in each of these documents combined with a series of new recommendations focused on resolving the concerns arisen in relation to Madrasa Institutions in Sri Lanka.

2) Problem Analysis

There have been numerous problems identified in relation to Madrasa Institutions in Sri Lanka. The following paragraphs analyse the most significant concerns out of the many issues identified.

2.1 A number of institutions in the name of Madrasa:

There are 317 Arabic Colleges (Madrasas) are registered with the DMRCA while 135 Arabic Colleges (Madrasa) are not registered as per the information collected by the DMRCA. Anyway, the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on National Security report talks about 175 institutions as not registered yet. Hence, it could be assumed that there are a maximum of 492 Arabic colleges at present.

2.2 Unemployed Moulavees: It is estimated that there may be around 28,000 students enrolled in these Madrasas (Arabic Colleges). The Community Association of Professionals (CAP) study on Contemporary Madrasah Education System in Sri Lanka identifies that there are 317 registered Madrasas under the DMRCA, out of which, approximately 73% have more than 50 students. The large number of Madrasas in Sri Lanka produce a significantly large proportion of Islamic theologians every year and a substantial amount of these individuals remain unemployed.

2.3 Regulation and Supervision: There is currently no national or international authority to monitor and set standards for Madrasa Institutions. As a result, the curricula taught in these institutions are vastly different from each other and are not nationally accredited. This has led to issues related to number of children in Madrasa schools, the content and quality of education, the number of teachers, qualifications of the teachers, basic facilities for children, the type of registration, the financial resources and finance management. There are no minimum requirements to commence a Madrasa Institution and no minimum age of enrollment of students.

2.4 Language Used for Teaching: The CAP Report has found out that 96% of the Madrasa Institutions use Tamil for teaching purposes and pays relatively less attention to Sinhala and English.

2.5 Lack of an Organizational Structure: A significant proportion of these Institutions do not possess a proper organizational structure. This has caused issues in management and administration.

2.6 Lack of a Full-time Formal Education for Students: Although the National Education Policy recommends 13 years of full-time formal education for all children in the country, this is not followed by many Madrasa Institutions.

2.7 Unqualified Teachers in Madrasas: There is no proper mechanism to identify and verify if the teachers at Madrasas are qualified for the positions and there is no vetting process. At the moment, anyone has the ability to start a Madrasa irrespective of their qualifications.

3) Reform Initiatives

There have been several Reform attempts to resolve the issues related to Arabic Colleges (Madrasa Institutes) in Sri Lanka, especially, following the tragic Easter Sunday incident. Among them, the following documents have recommended practical solutions.

- 3.1 Draft Islamic Education Bill Submitted to the Cabinet of Previous Govt.
- 3.2 Report of the Special Parliamentary Select Committee
- 3.3 Report of the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on National Security
- 3.4 Report of Community Association of Professionals
- 3.5 DMRCA Deliberations with the Principals and Board Members of Arabic Colleges

3.1 Draft Madrasa Education Bill / Draft Islamic Education Bill Submitted to the Cabinet of Previous Government - 13th May 2019

The Bill was drafted with the objective of establishing an Islamic Education Board comprising of 11 members to reorganize, regulate, supervise, control, enforce, develop, and improve the Madrasa Education in the island. The board was to be given special powers in relation to registration and deregistration of Islamic Educational Institutes throughout the country based on compliance with standards set out by a quality assurance manual and special powers in relation to the development and amendment of curricula followed by the Islamic Educational Institutes amongst many other powers. The Bill has proposed the following:

- A madrasas education board /Islamic Education Board established
- Any Madrasa/Islamic Education Institute that is not registered shall be considered illegal and legal action should be taken
- Age of enrollment shall be 16 years
- Only Madrasas that meets the standards set by Madrasa Standardization Manual will be registered under the new Act
- Teachers should meet the minimum educational and professional qualifications
- All madrasas should teach only one syllabi approved by the Madrasas Education Board
- A common exam should be conducted for the Madrasas students
- Vocational training should be given to the Madrasa students to ensure a descent earning

3.2 Report of the Special Parliamentary Select Committee

Following the Easter Sunday Attacks on the 21st April 2019, 40 Members of Parliament presented a resolution in Parliament requesting the appointment of a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) to investigate the incident and present recommendations to avoid further tragedies. The Parliamentary Select Committee was comprised of the following members:

- Hon. J.M. Ananda Kumarasiri, (MP), Deputy Speaker and Chair of the Committee
- Hon. Rauff Hakeem (MP)
- Hon. Ravi Karunanayake (MP)
- Hon. (Dr.) Rajitha Senaratne (MP)
- Hon. Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka (MP)
- Hon. M.A. Sumanthiran, President's Counsel (MP)
- Hon. (Dr) Nalinda Jayathissa (MP)
- Hon. (Prof) Ashu Marasinghe (MP)
- Hon. (Dr) Jayampathy Wickramaratne, (MP), President's Counsel

The PSC made several findings and recommendations in its report. The revealed among many things that there is no proper vetting processes to monitor Madarasas in Sri Lanka and issue licenses for preaching. Amongst its recommendations, the PSC stressed on the need to control and monitor the rise of religious extremism and proposed a series of reforms for the educational sector to counter this threat including the following:

- Reviewing the contents and redesigning the syllabi taught in schools and universities,
- Training educators to identify early signs of extremism in their students,
- Bringing the curriculums taught in Arabic Colleges under the purview of the Ministry of Education,
- Conducting regular reviews of educators and educational facilities,
- Forming laws to ban the conduct of educational institutions that only focus on religious education without following the general syllabus,
- Banning the conduct of pre-schools, schools, universities and higher education institutions solely based on religion as well as ethnicity,
- Promoting multi-cultural and multi-religious education were among the proposed recommendations.

3.3. Sectoral Oversight Committee Report on National Security - 19th February 2020

Report of the Proposals for Formulation and Implementation of relevant laws required to ensure National security that will eliminate New Terrorism and Extremism by strengthening friendship among Races and Religions

The Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security was convened in order to prepare a special report with proposals of laws that must be formulated and implemented to ensure National Security with the objective of eliminating New Terrorism and Extremism while strengthening friendship among Races and Religions. The committee was comprised of the following members:

- Hon. Malith Jayathilake, (MP), (Chair)
- Hon. Shehan Semasinghe (MP)
- Hon. Vijitha Herath (MP)
- Hon. Weerakumara Dissanayake (MP)
- Hon. Buddhika Pathirana (MP)
- Hon. M. S. Thowfeek (MP)
- Hon. Palitha Kumara Thewarapperuma (MP)
- Hon. S. Viyalanderan (MP)
- Hon. Dharmalingam Sithadthan (MP)
- Hon. A. A. Wijethunga (MP)
- Hon. M. A. Sumanthiran (MP)
- Hon. Chandima Gamage (MP)
- Hon. (Dr.) Kavinda Heshan Jayawardane (MP)
- Hon. Mayantha Dissanayake (MP)
- Hon. Bandula Lal Bandarigoda (MP)
- Hon. Muhammad Ibrahim Muhammad Mansoor (MP)
- Hon. (Prof.) Ashu Marasinghe (MP)

In its explanation, the report identified a series of issues related to the current education system in Sri Lanka that could potentially lead to National Security threats. To overcome these issues mentioned, the Sectoral Oversight Committee Report on National Security suggested the following recommendations:

- Madrasa Institutions should be considered as special educational institutions and they must be run as educational institutions that train Islamic Moulavis.
- A committee of regulating Madrasa institutions should be established under the Department of Muslim religious and cultural affairs.
- All children in the country should receive at least 11 years of formal education (up to G.C.E (o/L)). Accordingly, a child should have completed 16 years of age to be admitted to a Madrasa institution. There must be a standard age and minimum qualifications required to be admitted to a Madrasa after a child has completed 11 years of common education.
- A formal study about Madrasa Institutions should be conducted soon. The study should be conducted under the supervision of the Committee Regulating Madrasa Institutions.
- The maximum number of Madrasas in Sri Lanka should be limited to 75.
- A national programme should be developed to absorb all students studying in the Madrasas at present to the general education system by 2023.

- All special education systems must give way for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural education.

3.4 Study Published by the Community Association of Professionals

The study proposes a series of recommendations under 10 major contentious areas. The study provides recommendations in line with the Regulation and Supervision of Madrasas, the number of Madrasas, the languages used for teaching, organizational structure, financial management, human resource management, student admission, curriculum, and teachers.

3.5 DMRCA Deliberations with the Principals and Board Members of Arabic Colleges

The Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs (DMRCA) has had deliberations with Principals and Board Members of the Arabic Colleges in Sri Lanka on several occasions during 2020. During the deliberations, the Principals and the Board Members had unanimously agreed on most of the reform proposals put forward by the DMRCA. There has been consensus on the proposals presented in relation to the standardization of Arabic Colleges. The Principals of these schools have agreed on the propositions based on harmonization with other religious institutions and Government Schools. These colleges are also willing to teach the curriculum in languages other than Tamil and the Principals and the Board Members had unanimously agreed to expose the Madrasa students to other religious ideologies.

However, there had been substantial opposition to the idea of OL or age 16 as enrollment requirement arguing that it is difficult to attract and nurture students at a mature age. They had also protested the proposal to close and reduce the number of Madrasas in the country.

Meeting with the Dedication of Two Madrasa Associations

Finally, Director of MRCA has met the following delegation of Iththihadul Madaris and Ribathul Madaris, two associations of Arabic Colleges at the Department on 01.01.2021.

1. As-Sheikh M.H.M. Burhan (President, Iththihadul Madaris - Thableeq)
2. As-Sheikh S.A. M. Jahfar (Member, Iththihadul Madaris - Thableeque)
3. As-Sheikh H.Omer Deen (Member, Iththihadul Madaris - Thableeque)
4. As-Sheikh A.L.M. Rila (Member, Ribathul Madaris - Thareeqa)
5. As-Sheikh M.B.M. Hisham (Member, Ribathul Madaris - Thareeqa)
6. As-Sheikh C.I.M. Azmeer (Member, Ribathul Madaris - Thareeqa)
7. As-Sheikh Arkam Noorath (Member, Wakfs Board of Sri Lanka)

The above representatives of both Madrasa Associations have agreed for the following and requested that the Ministry of Buddha Sasana arrange a meeting with the Hon. Minister of Education with the members of the two associations as soon as possible to discuss the following change and implement with immediate effect.

1. Implementing a Common Syllabus: Two associations have already prepared a common syllabus and prepared to implement it under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. No extremism is allowed.
2. Providing general education to the children of school age
3. Teaching other religions, using the priests of relevant religions or scholars of those religions
4. Giving prominence to Sinhala language in order to make the Moulavees conversant in that language
5. One common examination for all Madrasas and certification of Moulavees
6. Teacher training and supervision by a central authority and disciplinary action against those teachers who preach or teach extremist contents

The Madrasa representative have not agreed for the following to important and critical proposals:

1. Reducing the number of Madrasas to 75: Iththihaadul Madaris was favorable for clustering the Madrasa while Ribaathul Madaris was not favorable for any voluntary reduction
2. Restricting the age of enrolment to 16 years

4) Way Forward

Considering all the above recommendations presented by various reform documents and the output of the deliberations done by the DMRCA, the following can be presented as the most feasible recommendations.

4.1 Standardization of Arabic Schools

- Age Restrictions for Enrollment as Students – Setting a minimum age for students to eligible to join Madrasa Institutions.
- Compulsory General Education – Students who attend Arabic Colleges must complete at least the GCE Ordinary Level Examination (O/L). All students who are below 16 years of age must be given a mandatory formal education like in the Seminaries and Pirivanas.
- Developing a Nationally Accredited Curriculum for Madrasas – The current curriculum (Al Aalim Certificate Examination) needs to be revised.
- Inclusion of Extra-curricular Activities – Apart from the curriculum taught at the College, every Madrasa must provide access, facilities and opportunities for students to engage in extra-curricular activities.

4.2 Minimum Qualifications for Madrasa teachers, Remuneration and Continuous Professional Development

- Madrasa teachers must be at par with rest of the educational institutions in terms of qualifications to teach the children in the modern world. Similarly a decent remuneration scheme to attract the best talent as well as a continuous professional development are necessary in order to upgrade the quality of Arabic Colleges.
- Issuing a license for all Maulavis who are qualified to teach at Arabic Colleges.

4.3 Reducing the number of Madrasas: Cluster-based Supervision and Regulation

- Leading Arabic Colleges and Branches – Selecting a Mother/Leading Arabic College in a given geographical area based on a set of criteria such as land owned, no. of students, basic facilities available (classrooms, hostels, etc.), other additional facilities (playgrounds, etc.), financial capacity (income and assets) and any other resources available.
- Preliminary Application Process: All Arabic Colleges will initially have to declare all information about the College to the Government.
- Voting Process: In addition to providing the information, each Madrasa will be given the opportunity to nominate 3 Madrasas for the Leading Madrasa based on their preferences. Each Arabic College will be able to vote on the best Arabic Colleges within the region based on a preferential voting system. This way number of madrasas will be restricted to a maximum of 75, if a proper and delicate mechanism is employed.
- The Department will then select one Leading College and the other Arabic Colleges will be functional under the Leading College as its branches. This too is possible only if those branches can satisfy the minimum standards to be recognized as a branch hence on the long run all substandard institutes will be eliminated.
- Leading Arabic Colleges: Leading Arabic colleges will function as the central institutions within a selected geographical area representing all the Arabic Colleges in that geographical area and the rest of the Arabic Colleges within the same geographical area will function under the guidance of the Leading Arabic Colleges. The Leading Arabic Colleges will maintain a close relationship with the Government and will function as a nexus between the Arabic Colleges and the State.
- On the long run, only leading madrasas will remain as Madrasas institutes

4.4 Retaining the Regulatory and Supervisory Authority under the Ministry of Education

- The Ministry of Education will retain the power to remove principals if necessary.
- The curriculum taught by the Arabic Colleges will be developed under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

4.5. Banning or closing all unregistered Madrasas

4.6. Prohibiting Further Registrations (with exceptions*)**

5) Action Plan – 2021

Action Plan	Deadline (Tentatively)
Appoint a consultant to draw quality Control Standards for Arabic Colleges	With immediate effect before 31 st Dec 2020
Implement interim syllabi	15 th Jan 2021
Cabinet Approval	20 th Jan 2021
Committee to Regulate Arabic Colleges (Accreditation)	25 th Jan 2021
Appoint a curricula committee	30 th Jan 2021
Standardization – Manual for standardization prepared and published	15 th Feb 2021
Preliminary Application Process to select Lead Madrasas (LM)	01 st Feb 2021
Register Lead Arabic Colleges (LM) based on eligibility	15 th Feb 2021
Evaluate and appoint principals or appoint new principals based on the standardization manual	23 rd Feb 2021
Assessing and standardizing the other Arabic Colleges before joining the LM	28 th Feb 2021
Training Principals of Lead Arabic Colleges	31 st Mar 2021
Enlisting other Madrasas under the Lead Arabic Colleges (LM)	31 st Mar 2021
Evaluate, training the teachers	21 st Apr 2021
Commence writing New Textbooks	31 st April 2021
Introducing a Common Certificate for all Arabic Colleges	June 2021
Arrangements to start School education for the Children of School Age, at the Madrasah itself or sending to a nearby school	June 2021
Conduct Examinations	15 th December 2021